NEW WORLDS

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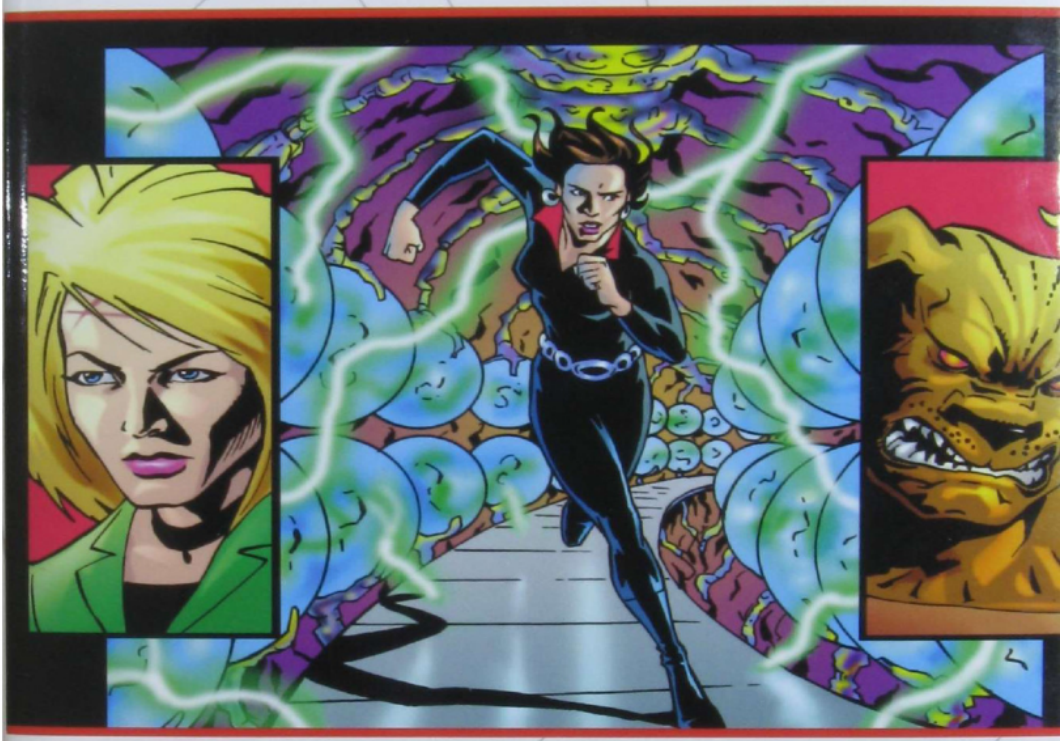
COLLECTED WORKS



edited by
nick wallace

BIG FINISH

COLLECTED WORKS

A Short-Story Anthology
Edited by Nick Wallace

BIG
FINISH

‘It might be your name on the deeds, but you don’t belong here any more. This is our home, our collection.’

The Braxiatel Collection. It’s a museum, art gallery and academic institute. A home for renowned archaeologists, runaway art thieves and galactic waifs and strays. It’s been a private playground and the battlefield in the fight against tyranny. And now things are changing again.

With the Collection’s founder missing, it’s up to those left behind to make this place their own. Amidst the chaos of visitors from the far future, dark secrets, old friends and new enemies, Bernice Summerfield must do whatever’s necessary to keep the doors open and her family safe. Yet through it all, there’s one truth she cannot escape. Braxiatel is gone. And nature abhors a vacuum.

Featuring brand-new stories from Lance Parkin, Kate Orman, Simon Bucher-Jones, Mags L. Halliday and Simon A. Forward.

Nick Wallace made his professional writing debut in the Big Finish anthology “Life During Wartime” and wrote the acclaimed “Fear Itself” for the BBC’s range of original Doctor Who novels. He spends his days working in programme acquisitions and script development for a media consultancy firm.

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The four of them meet one evening in late summer.

There are decisions to be made.

The venue is the flat roof of one of the student houses. The occupants figured out how to hack the lock and – being students – a party ensued. As the sun sets, music drifts over the hamlet. The tight curve of the horizon is even more visible from up here. The roof vibrates with the step of dancing feet and the building's long shadow chases the last daylight across the surface of the lake. Anyone enjoying a quiet meal at Cafe Vosta is unlikely to be disturbed by the sounds, but if they look towards the hamlet, they might just see rooftop silhouettes, twisting against the setting sun.

When daylight comes again, only four are there to see it. They know too well that kids don't have the stamina for a real party. All hormones, adrenalin and instant gratification.

It's no coincidence that the group which lasted the pace is the one that brought deck chairs.

The two women wear sunglasses, sleeves and trouser legs rolled up, waiting for the sun to hit their skin. The blonde looks impassively at the horizon. The one with dark hair has her hand entwined with that of the man on her right.

His head and eyes are drooping, a mess of hair over his face. It was his idea to come, but – typically – it's him who's come off worst. Too much of the student in him. He's only stayed for these moments.

These moments being the only reason the other man is here at all. His massive form is awkward in the deck chair at the other end of the line, the nervousness in his eye suggests he's just waiting for it to collapse beneath him.

As the sun begins to flare, the two men look at each other and, with a murmured excuse about drinks, they get up and walk back across the rooftop.

The dark-haired woman feels suddenly lost with the absence of his hand.

To shake off the sensation and any realisation it might provoke, she reaches down to the bucket that sits between her and the other woman.

As she draws a wine bottle from the ice water, her companion is nervously playing with her hair. The thin white line of a scar shows briefly and is then hidden again.

Bernice pours the wine and hands the glass over to Bev.

'There are things we need to be doing,' she says.

'I know,' Bev answers.

'Choices to be made.' She sips at her own glass, then nods at the horizon.

'This place. We have to figure out just what we do.'

There's a pause, then Bev says, 'We'll need to work together. You understand that, right? That's what all this was for.'

And Bernice does understand. They both know why the men brought them here. Both know what needs to be done and the roles they're going to

have to play. She looks out onto the campus as the sun inches its way towards them.

Light catches on hard metallic lines: Hass out early, working the soil on the rise above the lake. Ripples spread across the water where a carp jumps free to swallow a dragonfly whole. A refuse drone skirts the paths, force fields inhaling leaves and scrap paper. In the distance, a clatter of pans as the kitchens groan into life, ready for the morning rush. The tall figure of a Cahlian walks towards the advanced research facility, head down, oblivious to the waking world around him.

We'll need to work together.

'I'm an archaeologist,' Bernice says. 'I know when to call the past history.'

She glances at Bev, and the two share a smile. 'We're smart, intelligent women with a job to do. Of course, we're going to work together.'

'Boys,'Bev sighs.

Bernice nods, then says, 'Good party, though.'

'Excellent party,' Bev agrees.

Work in Progress

Nick Wallace

There was a game that Killorans played. They called it Perception. A game for children.

A three-dimensional jigsaw of solid holograms, it encouraged a better understanding of their environment, and went something like this. The holographic projector was programmed with a particular algorithm, generating a single initial piece: the Key.

Within certain parameters of height and mass, this Key was a random creation. A set number of pieces – building blocks – were placed around it, with the game's outcome hinging on the final move.

Once the last piece was in place, a circuit was completed and the holographic projector removed the Key. Winning or losing depended on whether the structure stayed standing once the heart around which it had formed was gone.

Adrian had given Peter the game for his fifth birthday. In the eight months since, Benny hadn't been able to cross her living room without treading on one of those blocks. Every day, the alarm clock was beaten to the punch by Peter's latest tower collapsing.

The game, to be frank, was a right pain in the arse.

'Shoes!' Benny cried, stumbling into the living room. 'Shoes,' she repeated. 'Quickly!'

'I know, I know.' Jason was on the carpet, one arm under the sofa.

'I'm looking, all right?'

Benny glanced at the clock. 'Not all right. Most definitely not all right.'

His arm emerged, tossed a slingback over to Bernice. As she pulled the shoe on, Jason returned to the hunt. 'What time is the, er, thing?' he asked.

'Not entirely sure. Some time in the next fifteen minutes, I think.'

'How can you be "not entirely sure"?' Jason's face pressed up against the sofa as he pushed his arm underneath; a flicker of concentration, fingers connecting with something; a frustrated crease as they lost purchase.

'It's the relativistic shift in chronometric particles as they interact with the Collection's barrier defences.'

'You're making that up.'

'Quite possibly. All I know is time corridors are unpredictable unless properly controlled at both ends. And we're lacking expertise.'

Bernice looked at Jason, arm fully outstretched, fingertips

scrabbling.

'Speaking of which,' She walked around and grabbed the shoe that was protruding from beneath the back of the sofa.

'I nearly had that,' Jason protested.

Bernice gave him a peck on the cheek, 'And left to your own devices, you'd run a marathon to complete a sprint.'

'Left to my own devices,' Jason replied, 'I'd use a teleport and a holographic double.'

Another time, Benny would have been concerned by what that said about Jason, his pathological need for acceptance, and the innate cunning he'd employ to get it. This morning, it was just filed in the box labelled *Being Jason Kane* as she ran for the door.

This, of course, being the moment her heel caught on Peter's blocks.

Peter heard his mum shouting; one of the words his dad had told him never to repeat. A few minutes later, Uncle Jason's head peered round the door.

'Time to get up, sleepy.'

'Aw,' Peter made a show of pulling at the covers.

'You were awake anyway,' Jason smiled. 'School holidays, remember. Make the most of it, yeah?'

Something landed on the covers.

'Just don't forget to comb your hair today.'

As the door closed, Peter picked up the something and climbed from his bed. He turned the metal comb over in his hand, picking at it with a nail to make it ping.

Normally, he wouldn't have bothered with his hair. But then he remembered. And with a smile turned to the mirror. Lifting the comb to his hair, his action mimicked in the reflection A tall thin man, with a deathly pale face and hollow eyes, reaching up to his own bedraggled dark hair.

Peter smiled at the reflection: 'Morning, Uncle Brax.'

A few years previously the Braxiatel Collection had been a playground. A place where its owner hoarded treasures and exchanged pleasantries with favoured academics. An unreal locale, cut off from the cold realities of the universe outside.

Then, one day, the universe had come knocking. Hard, brutal and unforgiving. And the Collection had changed.

Changed too when those who violated its peace were beaten back.

Irving Braxiatel, the man who gave his name to this assortment of relics and bric-a-brac, had decreed it was time to abandon isolation and open their doors. When he'd invited students and academia to populate his home, it was to help the people who'd suffered. To restore order and normality to their lives.

Only Braxiatel had been a private man, and on some level Bernice suspected his new-found philanthropy was thinly disguised narcissism. Isolation had left him vulnerable.

Bernice had wondered about his motives, had thought, speculated, but never asked.

And now the opportunity might never come her way.

The hamlet where the students and academics lived was being remodelled. As Bernice hobbled out of her front door, she was confronted with piles of sand and dusty clouds. Building drones manipulated force fields while towering Killorans stripped aging render from the brickwork.

Adrian was in the thick of it, the fur on his massive forearms matted with hardening cement. A finger passed over his goggles, cleaning a window through which he could see Benny. He smiled – a fairy-tale smile of wolf teeth – and waved, then plunged his hands back into a wheelbarrow, judging the consistency of a plasti-crete mix.

Benny would normally have commandeered a flyer to get to the reception. Only an order for spare parts had gone astray and flyers were being reserved for VIPs only.

Which left Plan B: run.

On the whole, it worked pretty well.

The early morning clouds were lifting as the Mansionhouse came into view, sunlight catching the tall windows flanking the terrace. A small machine had been set up on the flagstones, scanning back and forth across the sky. Most of the personnel surrounding it, however, were facing the garden itself.

Most were, in fact, watching as Bernice crashed through a set of rose bushes and almost tumbled down the steep bank hidden behind them.

Benny straightened her back, approached with a smile, and nodded at the machine: ‘Not picked up the carrier signal yet?’

‘No,’ Bev Tarrant replied. She plucked a rose petal from Benny’s hair, then looked her up and down, finally settling on ‘down’ as she inspected her feet. ‘You know how to dress for the occasion.’

‘Nike goes with a McCartney trouser suit. Twenty-first-century chic is all the rage.’

Bev shook her head, gave a genuine smile Benny would never have expected a few months ago. ‘You’re a working mother and academic of renown. Isn’t it time you stopped that bullshit?’

‘Quite probably,’ Bernice nodded, ‘but you can’t blame a girl for trying. I broke one of my heels.’

‘That bloody game? I nearly broke my neck last time we babysat.’

The machine bleeped. Doggles studied the figures, then scratched the back of his neck. It looked like a new shirt, but there was already

a stain on the collar. ‘That’s their signal. Should be initialising in the next minute or so. I think.’ He shrugged, ‘Sorry, this isn’t my technology, is it?’

Bev turned back to the gardens. The smile gone, replaced by her game face. Focused, commanding, civil. It was only now Benny noticed the real change.

‘Christ on a bike, you’re wearing a skirt!’

A breeze picked up from nowhere. Leaves circled the terrace.

‘Not now, Bernice,’ Bev said.

The machine began to hum.

‘No, but it’s a skirt.’

The hum got louder, the air shimmered.

‘Yes,’ Bev answered, ‘it’s a skirt.’

‘And you’ve got legs!’

The shimmer became a ripple, a slow hurricane of distortion.

‘Yes,’ Bev agreed, ‘I’ve got legs.’

Within the hurricane everything seemed different. Clouds raced, the sky flashed light and dark, leaves withered to nothing, flagstones turned to dust.

‘And they’re wearing tights and everything!’

Shapes began to form.

‘Stockings, actually,’ Bev replied.

The shapes became people.

‘Turns out Adrian’s an old-fashioned guy,’ she continued.

Six of them, standing in a circle, details sketched in with every passing second.

Bev caught Bernice’s eye. ‘He likes a woman in suspenders.’

In an instant, the breeze dropped, the leaves were still, the sky returned to normal, and the Collection’s latest visitors were on the terrace before them. Broadly humanoid, just over five feet tall, with three large wooden chests behind them.

It was just unfortunate that the instant they appeared was the exact same instant that Bernice offered the words: ‘Dirty old scrubber.’

One of the visitors stepped forward, looking around before finally settling on Bernice and Bev: ‘You are experiencing difficulties?’

They’d come to an agreement early on: Braxiatel’s office would be off-limits.

When he’d left, most of his rooms had vanished the same day. The only place remaining was his office suite. They’d opened the door and looked inside, but – without Braxiatel behind the desk – stepping over the threshold felt like trespass.

Bev would run things out of the Hall of Mirrors.

They made a quick pass through the office, then doors were shut, a

seal placed over the lock.

It was during that process they found the invitation.

A holographic slide encoded in dense three-dimensional symbols, it took the translators a full two days to decipher.

It was a record of a conversation Braxiatel had been having before his departure. The details remained beyond the translation protocols, but the gist was clear enough: Brax had been contacted by a group of scholars who wanted to visit the Collection. So far, so normal. Until you got to the bit where they came from some point a lot closer to the heat death of the universe.

'More detailed instructions wouldn't have hurt,' Doggles said. 'It's all very well telling me to establish a temporal anchor on such and such a date, but a manual for that bloody machine would have helped.' He tugged at his collar, leaving another oily fingerprint behind.

'Do you ever wash your hands?' Benny asked.

'Depends what I'm using them for.' He smiled, 'Besides, you're not in a position to comment on protocol.'

Bernice glanced across the banqueting hall to where Bev was talking to the visitors. 'They're from the future,' she said. '"Scrubber" is probably a prestigious title by then.'

'You hope.'

A chirp sounded. Doggles frowned, patting his pockets down to locate the offending item. A small titanium flipscreen.

He peered at it. 'What's your boyfriend calling me for?'

'No idea.' Benny swiped another champagne glass from a passing waiter. 'Why don't you answer it and find out?'

Doggles scowled, then tapped the screen: 'Yes?'

'Is Benny there?'

'I might have known,' Doggles sighed, handing it over.

Bernice looked at the image of Jason's face. 'Sorry, left mine in my other jacket. Is Peter all right?'

Jason glanced off-screen, then back to Benny. *'Not exactly.'*

'What is it?'

'He keeps on asking about Brax.'

'But we talked to him about Brax.'

'That's not the issue. He's talking like Brax is still here. And the thing is…' Jason shook his head. *'When I went to fetch Peter, I… There was… I thought…'*

'For pity's sake, just get on with it.'

'I could have sworn I saw Brax in his room.'

'You're imagining things. If Braxiatel were back, we'd know.'

'That's not the kind of Brax that I –'

Doggles's head jerked to one side. Bev was approaching, the new

scholars in tow. ‘I’ve got to go. Stay off the caffeine, we’ll talk later.’

‘But Benny –’

Bernice closed the link, tossed the flipscreen back to Doggles and swung around with a smile.

‘Formal introductions, I think,’ Bev said. She had four of the Quire with her. In the background, Bernice could see the other two being buttonholed by Parasiel and a handful of students. That was the trouble with visitors from the future. Everyone knew it was wrong, but they still couldn’t help but try to get next week’s lottery numbers.

The introductions, however, sounded like a good idea. She’d been distracted during the informal hellos, partly through her ill-timed exclamation, but mostly because she’d been staring at the new arrivals like a mesmerised goldfish.

Particularly the little girl, who was…

‘Benny?’ Bev’s voice had risen a notch.

She’d been doing it again.

‘Absolutely.’ Benny held her hand out to the nearest of the Quire. ‘Professor Bernice Summerfield. Archaeology, with specialities including bomb disposal, early Martian artefacts and getting shot at. I’ve also recently been pursuing an interest in having my limbs replaced.’

The woman regarded her hand with detached interest. ‘Verso,’ she responded. ‘These clansmen are Dorso, Bifolium, and Incunabula.’

Incunabula, that was the little girl’s name.

Verso was younger and probably prettier than Bernice, with lightly furred teak-coloured skin and powerful shoulders. Bernice’s fashion sense stopped with trainers, so her best description of Verso’s dress was a unisex toga-smock thing. In a complicated African-looking print. More telling, Bernice couldn’t escape the feeling that there was something very weird about her right eye but she just couldn’t spot what yet.

The one Verso had called Bifolium was to her right; a piebald male. To Verso’s left was the other woman – Dorso? – who looked similar but older, and was holding Incunabula, who looked to be around Peter’s age and who was…

‘Fantastic,’ Benny said.

She realised she was still holding her hand out, and turned the gesture into a dignified wave. According to what they’d deciphered, the Quire were actually human, inasmuch as there was anyone human left in whatever far-future era they came from. She’d heard the academics mutter the term ‘posthuman’ a couple of times during the reception, but for all Bernice knew the visitors thought of humans as ‘pre-Quire’.

‘No, hang on,’ she said. ‘Quire’s your family name, isn’t it?’

‘It is the name of our clan,’ Bifolium confirmed.

Like the women, he was shorter than Benny and stockily built.

Unlike them, his skin was patchworked pink and dark brown – white and black, in the colours-of-humanity sense. Distinct from the other clansmen, it reminded Benny of a chessboard. ‘In full, I would be Bifolium Fallowsolstice IV sir Quire Scholar.’

There was something in the way he said it. Still rigid, but somehow more knowing. And Bernice was suddenly no longer thinking chessboard but jester’s motley.

Next to him the woman began: ‘And I am Verso Quarterstaff VI –’

‘Okay,’ said Benny brightly. ‘No need for us to be quite so formal after all.’ She turned to the small girl in the… in Dorso’s arms. ‘I’m Benny. What’s your name, sweetheart?’

‘Incunabula Fallowstaff VII ess Quire Scholar,’ the child replied. ‘Am I your sweetheart? A sweetheart is a mate or lover, isn’t it?’

The little girl’s tone was just as formal and abstracted – as bloody superior – as all the rest of them. Bernice gawped at her for a decade or two, until Bev came to her rescue.

‘I must apologise,’ she began, ‘for Mr Braxiatel’s absence.’

‘Must you?’ Dorso looked baffled. ‘Why?’

Bev paused, changed tack. ‘His invitation mentioned a clanswoman called Epitome.’ From what Bernice recalled, Epitome was the clan matriarch and Braxiatel’s chief point of communication. ‘Has she stayed behind in your own time?’

‘Epitome was elderly,’ Incunabula replied. ‘She died. I am her replacement.’

This wasn’t going well.

Benny racked her brains for something to say that might prove consoling, diplomatic or generally troubled-water-oiling. Meanwhile Bev said, awkwardly, ‘I’m sorry, that was clumsy of me. Again, I must apologise.’

Verso looked baffled. ‘Why? You would not have known.’

Turning to Dorso, Bernice fought for something to say to fill the space. The thing that came out was the question that had been bothering her from the moment the Quire appeared through the time corridor.

As these things went, she thought ‘Why is your daughter inside a giant glass egg?’ was a good conversation starter.

It was unfortunate that the answer was cut off by a scream from the foyer.

Bev and Bernice glanced at each other, but before either could move, there was a bang at the doors leading into the banqueting hall.

Silence, then another bang.

‘What the hell?’

‘You remembered to invite the theological department, didn’t you?’

Benny asked. Another bang rang out. The doors shook on their hinges. ‘Only they get quite upset if they miss out on canapes.’

‘That’s them by the buffet,’ Bev said. Another bang. ‘And we’re not expecting visitors.’ She tapped the comms button on her flipscreen: ‘I need security –’

She was cut off by splintering wood, one set of hinges exploding from the doorframe. A moment of silence, then the door creaked, toppled inwards. Gilt finish split, plaster clouded the entrance. A figure waded through the dust.

Dark jacket. Silk tie. Silver cufflinks. Aquiline look. But it was all wrong. His hair hung loose, no colour in his face, contours marked by pallid skin, eyes darting feverishly around the room, mouth contorting in silent rage.

Only when someone screamed did Bernice see what was wrong. A ragged hole in the jacket, right of his breast pocket, fabric charred. It wasn’t a dark jacket. It was white linen soaked black with blood. He looked like death.

‘Brax?’ Benny whispered.

He turned. His stumbling walk stuttered, broke into life, into a run, running towards her. Bev grabbed Benny’s arm, tried to pull her away, but it was too late.

Then he was gone.

Bernice blinked.

There was still dust in the air, broken glass where drinks had fallen, champagne footprints marking his charge. The watching faces told her it had happened.

Dorso looked at the trail of destruction, then met Bernice’s eye:

‘You are experiencing difficulties.’

Bernice scanned the room, finding a lone waiter: ‘You. A Kane’sworth of brandy. Now.’

They found a conference room, windows overlooking the gardens.

Shadows tore across the gravel. Mid-September, the weather machines should have been set for a quiet autumn – Hass’s request, something to do with protecting Centauri hydrangeas – but it looked stormy.

Jason entered, taking in the dark glass conference table, the expectant way they were arrayed around it. ‘It’s a bit *Next Generation,* isn’t it?’

Bev pointed to an empty chair.

‘Suggestions?’ she said.

‘It was Brax,’ Bernice replied. ‘And it was a pissed-off ghost. What those facts suggest is obvious.’

Jason shook his head, ‘We don’t know that.’

‘You weren’t there,’ Bev said.

Jason glared at her, ‘And you didn’t see him with Peter. Ghostly, yeah, but not pissed off. They were talking.’

‘The operative word is still “ghostly”.’

As Jason opened his mouth, Bernice planted her hand across it, smiled at Doggles. ‘Alternatives, please.’

‘He was badly hurt,’ Bev said. ‘An SOS?’

Doggles sucked air through his teeth. If his personal hygiene were a sound, that would have been it. ‘Possible, but an emergency message usually goes “help”, that kind of thing.’

‘Only he didn’t want help.’

‘Plus, he was interacting with the environment. And hard-light interactivity takes time and power.’

‘Fine,’ Bev nodded. ‘We should still rule it out. Can you check for an incoming signal?’

Doggles crossed his arms behind his head. ‘Set the program running ten minutes ago.’

‘Then you and Jason can check the results when it’s done.’

‘What about the Quire?’ Benny asked. ‘Could they be testing us? Some psychological experiment?’

Bev opened up a port on the desktop. ‘Pull all the footage we’ve got of the Quire. Keep watching until I tell you otherwise, but make it non-obtrusive surveillance.’ She looked at the others, shrugged, ‘First formal visitors for months. No sense pissing them off unnecessarily.’ Jason coughed, raised his hand. ‘Aren’t we forgetting something here? He came to Peter first.’

‘So?’

‘They were talking. Perhaps we should ask Peter what about?’

Among assorted books and building blocks, the shelves in Benny’s living room held crystal holographs. The centrepiece was a portrait of Peter. To its left was one from a few years back; shortly after Braxiatel opened up the Collection.

Benny seated on a bench in full regalia; Clarissa to her right; Jason. Adrian. Bev and Peter behind her. And on her left, immaculate as always, Irving Braxiatel.

Bernice had struggled to look away from it since they’d sat down.

Peter shifted on the sofa. Adrian on one side, holding his hand; Bernice on the other, touching his knee. That shifting was the tell Peter always had when he thought he was in trouble.

‘It’s all right,’ Benny told him. ‘You haven’t done anything wrong. We just need to know what happened with Uncle Brax.’

Peter looked around to his dad. He didn’t understand, it was that

simple. ‘I’m allowed to talk to Uncle Brax.’

Bernice caught Adrian’s eye. He shrugged, squeezed Peter’s hand.

‘Remember the first time we played Perception? And I tried to tie that arch in, even though it didn’t fit?’

Peter nodded. ‘It fell down.’

‘This is like that. There’s nothing wrong with building an arch, and there’s nothing wrong with talking to Uncle Brax. But build the arch in the wrong spot and it won’t fit.’

‘Uncle Brax does fit. He lives here.’

Adrian looked apologetically at Bernice. Bernice rubbed her temple, trying to ease a rapidly developing headache.

‘Peter,’ Benny said, ‘can you tell us what you were talking about?’

‘Lots of things.’

As he said it, Benny’s eye was caught by the hologram again.

Braxiatel’s head turning towards her. A trick of the light.

‘Like?’

Peter squirmed. ‘It was silly.’

Benny’s eye flicked to the hologram. The picture seemed to be darkening.

‘Go on,’ Adrian said.

‘He wanted to warn me. But I couldn’t understand what he was talking about. Something bad. To do with…’

‘With what, Peter?’ Benny insisted.

Peter squirmed one last time. ‘Uncle Jason,’ he said.

There was no sound. No way to know it had happened unless you were looking straight at it. But Bernice was, and – in the blink of an eye – the crystal had faded to black.

She left Peter with Adrian, went down to the lake. There were students on the cafe decking; new intake, just a handful this year. They’d all known Braxiatel’s influence extended beyond KS-159, connections that made setting up his own institution so much easier. And although most people never saw him, word had got out when Braxiatel left.

Enquiries and cancellations had started less than a day later.

Now his absence represented a bigger problem than keeping numbers up.

A student jostled his peers, arms outstretched, zombie-fashion.

The incident at the reception passing along the grapevine.

Benny collected a large cappuccino and walked off along the shore.

A few minutes away, there was a small inlet shrouded by trees where the ducks gathered in summer. It was empty today, the breeze raising goose-pimples on her bare arms.

She unsealed the mug, took a sip, burning her tongue. She flinched

and the liquid spilt over onto her fingers, and then the mug was lying on the bank, coffee draining away. Enough people had been scalded in recent weeks that she should have known better.

'No use crying over spilt.' She stopped, whispered, 'Dammit.'

There was a hiss and a wheeze behind her.

Hass's control of his environment suit was impressive; gardening required a light touch, so it needed to be. But while he could regulate the pressure of his tread and touch, he could do nothing about the noise the suit generated. Making his way through the trees, shadows danced over its polished surface.

The head swung towards her, catching Benny rubbing her forearms. 'Typical,' she smiled. 'Go looking for ducks and you end up with chicken-skin.'

'Chicken-skin?' Hass asked.

'German for goose-pimples,' she explained.

'Ah.' Hass nodded. Behind the faceplate his gelatinous body swirled and reshaped as he considered this. Crouched down, metal fingers needed the moss on the bank. 'And what is a German?'

Hass had been doing a lot of that kind of thing in the months since Doggles's arrival. Benny's recollection of events was hazy – everyone's was, it had been a chaotic time – but she had a sense Hass had been different before then. Some things had stayed the same – the environment suit, the way he tended the gardens – but others had changed. The way he probed the soil like an exotic artefact and constantly questioned still seemed discordant. *What is a German?* was. Benny somehow knew, typically new Hass.

'Ask Jason about two world wars and one world cup sometime,' Benny answered.

Hass paused, was still for a long moment, then – as much as the suit allowed – he nodded, returning his attention to the garden. Rising to his feet he moved away around the inlet.

It was only when he disappeared Benny realised she hadn't dared move.

Bernice didn't know a lot about parapsychology. The study of telepathy and telekinetics was commonplace, but scientific investigation of ghosts and poltergeists was rare. Incidence remained comparatively low and the dead were always problematic interviewees.

The theory was that gifted telepaths left behind a residual energy when they died, imprinted with their personality. This would be tied to a place the person had been connected to and motivated by strong emotional need; usually manifested as frustration and violence.

Because more often than not, what the ghost wanted was revenge.

As Hass had turned towards her. Benny had looked into the swirling

mass behind the faceplate, and just for a moment, like a cloud on a summer's day, it had become Braxiatel.

Like the battery dying on the holo-crystal, it could have been coincidence. But just like then, the moment Benny had seen Braxiatel's face had been the moment his name had been mentioned.

Jason.

She pulled out her flipscreen, put a call through to Bev's office.

When the stables had been rebuilt, they'd incorporated a lot of new technology. It was only when Doggles had taken up residence that it gained its new nomenclature: the advanced research facility.

It was raining when Bernice and Bev reached its doors. Jason was in the corner, watching some news report about a new organised crime investigation being mounted in the old Axis territories; Doggles was bent over a surrealist console.

'Nothing on the communications grid,' Doggles said, not even looking up. 'Some weird power spikes across the environmentals.'

There was crash of thunder. 'But you didn't need me to tell you that.'

'Can you wait outside?' Bev said.

Jason switch the screen off, frowning, as Doggles glanced at the rainwater trickling down the windowpane. 'Outside?'

Bev nodded. Doggles looked between her and Benny, then sighed, snatched an umbrella from the hatstand and marched out.

'What's going on?' Jason said, getting to his feet.

'We need to talk,' Bev explained.

'I gathered that.' He looked pointedly at Bev. 'Why are you carrying a gun?'

'We need to talk about what happened.'

'Benny, why is she carrying a gun?'

'We need to –'

'What's going –'

Bev grabbed Jason's wrist, turning and twisting it up behind his back as she kicked his legs out from under him.

'Bloody hell,' Jason gasped. 'I just wanted to know what was –'

Bev pulled a snub-nosed pistol from the back of Jason's trousers.

She ejected the powerpack, then released her hold and handed the weapon back to him.

'Sorry about that. But I'm the criminal round here, and you learn pretty quickly to spot when someone's carrying.' She fixed Jason with a look. 'And you've been carrying ever since you got back from Cantus.' She paused. 'Or more accurately, ever since Brax disappeared.'

Bernice said nothing, just watched as Jason looked between the two

of them, as he put the pieces together. The dawning comprehension hurt.

'Brax left,' he said.

'No,' Bev said. 'Brax disappeared. And the last person to see him at all was you.'

'Benny –' Jason started.

Bev cut him off. 'You and Benny have been pretty vague about what happened on Cantus. All we know is bad things happened and Brax was responsible.'

Jason shook his head. 'No, no, no,' he said. Only it didn't sound like Jason's voice. Not the Jason Benny knew. Small and frightened.

'Except Brax is back,' Bev continued, 'seemingly dead, but pissed off about something. And if there's one thing he seems annoyed about, it's you.'

'Hold on a minute!' Jason said. Bernice could see him bristling.

Usual form would have had Bev provoking the fight now, but she kept her voice level and reassuring.

'Peter said Brax was warning him. About you.'

'I'd never hurt Peter.'

'I know,' Bev said. 'But you never explained what happened between you and Brax. It wasn't important before. It is now.'

'I told you. We argued, he left. That's it, all right?'

'Not this time.'

Jason looked ready to explode. A wounded animal, trapped, nowhere to run.

Bernice spoke for the first time, said, 'Jason.'

He turned to her, and slowly the rage subsided. His muscles relaxed and his head sunk, his mouth tightened as he swallowed, then he looked away and said, 'He used me.'

Words that cut.

Bev shook her head, 'I don't think –'

'Shut up, Bev,' Bernice said. She reached out, taking Jason's hand.

Stepping in close. 'It's all right.'

'No,' he shook his head, 'it isn't.' One hand came up, clutching his left forearm. Holding tight. Beneath the shirt sleeve, Bernice knew there was a discoloration to the skin. An old scar. Jason was looking at his hand, gripping that arm like it was alien to him. He glanced up.

'He wanted to do the right thing, in his own way he was trying to do the right thing, to protect you, to protect Peter, but…'

'I understand.'

'He'd hypnotised me, had me dancing like a puppet for years, and…' He looked at Bernice, eyes brimming with tears. 'He used me, Benny. And I'd promised myself, I'd promised that would never happen again. And…'

She'd never asked about the scar. She'd never needed to. She knew how he'd got it, so many years ago. A small, frightened boy.

'It's all right,' she said.

'I didn't do anything, I swear. I just told him to go and he went. I didn't do anything.'

Benny nodded, held him tight, and whispered, 'I believe you.'

Lightning flashed outside and the lights went dark.

'Great,' Bev said.

When the lightning flashed again he was in the room with them.

'Jesus!' Jason screamed.

Braxiatel turned slowly on the spot, surveying the lab. Bernice couldn't be sure, but he seemed more solid this time. Given the apparition had previously flattened doors, it probably wasn't a good sign. Its rotation finally stopped as it settled on Benny and Jason.

He took a step towards them, only to find Bev Tarrant standing in his way.

'I don't know what you are,' she said, 'but this ends here.'

Braxiatel's head cocked to one side, an eyebrow raised.

'You left,' Bev said. 'You had a choice and you chose to leave. You left a hole for me and Benny to fill and we're doing that. Together. It might be your name on the deeds, but you don't belong here any more. This is our home, our collection.'

The jacket blistered, a hole spreading over the left breast. Moments later blood, dark in the negative light of the thunder storm, began to spread. Braxiatel's face tightened, lips drawing back in a snarl.

Something stirred in the corner of the room.

Benny watched Bev tense. How much of a fight could you have with a ghost?

Braxiatel swung a fist, Bev sidestepped the blow, reaching up to grab his wrist only to find Brax parrying her away. Around them lab equipment began to strain, a wind blowing up from nowhere. The air was thick with ozone. A flurry of bottles exploded around them. Bev started to draw her gun, but hadn't cleared the holster when a centrifuge broke free, catching her in the ribs, throwing her back against the wall.

Brax dived towards them, but only connected with the lab bench as Jason leapt one way and Benny the other.

Getting up onto all fours, Bernice found herself face to face with the something in the corner.

You are experiencing difficulties.

'Shit!' Benny threw herself towards the exit. 'Doggles! Get in here!'

The Cahlian appeared a moment later, dumbstruck as he surveyed the lab. Braxiatel was advancing on Jason, who was back-pedalling across the floor, fast running out of room.

Benny grabbed Doggles's arm, pointed him towards the corner. 'I think I've found our problem.' The machine Doggles had set up to anchor the time corridor was glowing, its sweep now charting Braxiatel's movements. 'How do we switch it off?'

'It shouldn't even be on!' Doggles checked the machine, pushing a lever all the way forward. Its lights dimmed and, for a second, Braxiatel paused. Then life returned to the device, and Brax gave a slight shake of his head before continuing his advance. On the floor behind him, Bev was just starting to pull herself up.

Doggles thumped the machine. 'I've cut the power, but it's not doing anything. It's just feeding off the residual energy from the time corridor.'

'Benny!' It was Jason, cornered, Braxiatel just moments away.

Bernice pushed Doggles out of the way, grasped the machine's power lever, pulled it all the way back. The lights on the console flared, flooding the room with temporal energy. 'Bev!' she screamed.

Thunder echoed and Braxiatel was still. Bev was lying on the floor, a smoking gun in her hand, the barrel levelled at Braxiatel's chest.

The bloodstain began to shrink, the charred fabric of the suit re-knitting itself. Braxiatel turned to Bernice and gave a faint smile.

'Very good,' he said. 'Well done indeed.'

He pitched forward to land across Jason, whispered something Benny couldn't hear, and then he was gone.

'I warned you about that machine,' Doggles said.

The lights had come back on after Brax disappeared. A couple of minutes after that, the storm started breaking up. Now, sunlight was piercing gaps in the cloud.

'Yeah?' Bev replied, rubbing her side. 'Well, I want it in storage until the Quire's tenure is up and they decide to bugger off back home. No more trans-temporal shit.'

'Shadow,' Doggles said. Trans-temporal *shadow.'*

'Whatever.'

'There's a reason why time travel isn't commonly available,' he replied. 'It's because the physics are a sodding nightmare and any time corridor is inherently unstable. If they're not properly configured, you're going to get all kinds of side effects. Stray chronons interacting with Braxiatel's temporal signature and reflecting a lot of –'

'Enough technogubbins,' Benny said. 'What was he? Christmas past? Christmas present?'

'Impossible to tell. The way it interacted with Bev's gunshot suggests cause and effect were a bit messed up.' Doggles looked at her and smiled, 'He was right, you were very clever boosting the power like that. Synchronised his time stream with ours, made him

vulnerable. So it could be past, present…'

'Or future,' Bernice finished. There was a pause, and she looked to the window. Jason was outside, sat on a bank of grass, looking back towards the Mansionhouse.

'Do excuse me,' Bernice said.

'Are you all right?' she asked, sitting down at his side.

Jason shrugged. The shrug of a small boy. 'I think so,' he said. He forced a smile, 'You said on Cerbeus Iera I didn't want to know what he'd done to me.'

'I understand,' Benny said. 'I really do.'

'The thing is,' Jason said, 'I don't think he knew what he was doing. I mean, it's like he figured out what was needed and never considered the consequences. Greater good and all that.'

'I can't believe you're defending –'

'He told me "sorry",' Jason said. 'That's what he whispered before he vanished, what he'd been trying to tell me the whole time. Peter just misunderstood. You know Brax. Too many big words.'

They sat there for a few minutes, watching the world go back to normal. Adrian hurried into the lab and emerged a few minutes later, hand in hand with Bev. The pair saw Benny and Jason, sauntered up the rise towards them

'Did you mean what you said in there?' Benny asked.

'Bloody right I did,' Bev answered, 'No more trans-temporal shit on my watch.'

'"It might be your name on the deeds, but you don't belong here any more. This is our home, our collection."'

Bev glanced down at her feet, hair obscuring her face. Adrian squeezed her hand. 'You said that?'

She glanced up, gave a quick smile. 'I might have.'

Adrian nodded. 'Good thought.'

Bev smiled evilly. 'You're not part Grel, are you?'

Adrian gave her a shove, and she tumbled to the grass with a yelp.

As Adrian sat down beside her, Bev propped herself up on her elbows, looked out across the grounds.

'I'm getting a lot of requests. People looking to secure expertise for private contracts, that kind of thing.'

'You're not leaving,' Bernice said flatly.

'Not me. You.'

'Oh.'

Jason looked over, smiled. 'I told you, Benny. You need to get out there. Places like this live off promotion. We need to convince the galaxy it's business as usual. That Braxiatel is just the name on the door.'

Bernice took his hand then. They'd all agreed it, a couple of months ago when Brax had left. Sat on a rooftop, they'd watched the sun come up and said they'd work together. And now, here they were again. The four of them. It was time to make good on that promise.

Our home, our Collection.

It was worth fighting for.

'Let's get to work,' she said.

The Tears of Laughter

David N. Smith

Two tons of rocket fuel ignites with a thunderclap. I'm only sat ten feet away, so it's easily enough to jolt me back into reality.

I'm crammed into a passenger seat on a jump shuttle, surrounded by over-excited students, unwashed artists and weird abominations from every corner of galaxy – I swear, one of them even has tentacles.

A glance out of the window reveals the shuttle has just fired its manoeuvring thrusters, so I close the book I was reading and stow it safely away in the bag beneath my seat. I turn back to the window and, for a moment, all I can see is the reflection of my own dark eyes and shaved head, so I look deeper, searching in the darkness; eager to catch my first glimpse of KS-I59.

From a distance it just looks like any other uninhabitable rock, but as the shuttle descends I can begin to make out lights, buildings, paths, even gardens. Tiny flyers shooting to and fro, carrying people about their busy, intricate, little lives. This isn't just another frozen planetoid – this is the Braxiatel Collection.

The shuttle bumps down with all the grace of a badly thrown brick.

I grab my bag and shuffle into the queue of rumpled passengers. A security drone drifts along the line, pausing only briefly to approve my fake identification disc.

Boudicca is waiting to meet me. She's grown a lot in the last two years so, despite her youth, this Killoran girl now towers over me; six foot five of bristling fur and claw. Her mane is dyed pink, waxed up into spikes; so clearly picking up grooming tips from the humans.

She is stood in arrivals, waiting under an imperious blue stone statue. I recognise the subject from the Collection's promotional material – Irving Braxiatel. His cold stone eyes watch impassively as the assorted people of the galaxy arrive and depart from this tiny world.

'How tasteless,' I comment, staring up at the stone effigy. 'How arrogant.'

'He's a good man, Anton. I doubt many would say the same about you.'

Boo and I know each other far too well. There are a lot of things that we never mention. A lot of things best left unsaid. She licks an incisor and emits a low chuckle. That's us catching up.

She bundles me into the back of a flyer and the little craft swoops off in the direction of the visitor accommodation. Her eyes fix on the

bag in my damp palms.

'Whatever is in there,' she growls, 'you won't get away with selling it here.'

I hesitate, choosing my words carefully, because I'm not sure whether that remark was a comment or a threat. If she knew, it would only take a moment for her to open the hatch and pitch my body out into the sky.

'I don't have a choice, Boo.'

'Criminals can fly under the radar for a while, but not forever.'

I hadn't realised Boo was so well informed. She's right too. Things are falling apart quicker than expected. And this little jaunt becomes that much more urgent.

'I didn't have a lot of choices,' I explain. 'If you know what I'm mixed up in, you know why I'm here.'

'You didn't have to involve me,' she snaps.

'But you must be desperate too, stuck on this rock. What did you do? Join the Killoran construction crew?' I laugh, but she looks away.

'If I do this we'll both be able to start over. So, it's worth taking a risk, isn't it?'

She grunts her disagreement, but doesn't kill me.

The flyer touches down and Boo shows me into her quaint cottage.

She wishes me goodnight and leaves me alone with my thoughts. I don't sleep well. In my dreams, Boo keeps trying to kill me.

* * *

The next morning arrives too soon. My feet carry me out of the cottage and up the long gravel path towards the Mansionhouse. My mind is lost in a fog, stuck on sleep-deprived autopilot. Without ever considering my actions, I suddenly find myself stood in one of the archive rooms.

Standing over a mountain of paperwork is the familiar frame of a trim and attractive woman.

'Bev.' Her name slips out before I can think. Damn autopilot.

She looks up, clearly caught off guard. As she turns her head I glimpse a thin white scar across the side of her face; it's well hidden, but I know the lines and shapes of her face far too well not to notice.

I stare a moment too long.

'Can I help you?' She doesn't recognise me. I refocus on her eyes – beautiful eyes – hoping desperately I might see some spark of recognition. Nothing. I've travelled billions of miles in the desperate hope of finding someone I might be able to trust, someone who might not ask too many questions, but she doesn't even remember me.

So different. A decade ago, she was lost, desperate. Now she's poised, refined, so far from the woman I knew. And here I am, so far

from the man I was. Her partner, her tutor.

'Bev, it's me. Anton.'

The spark of recognition flares in her eyes, explodes into an angry inferno. This was a danger. When you've become respectable, it must be a terrible shock to have your disreputable past walk up and say 'hello'.

'What the hell are you doing here?'

'Business. What happened to the face?' I ask abruptly, as you can do with an angry ex-lover.

'Fifth Axis,' she said. 'And then I happened to them.'

I'd forgotten how hostile Bev could be when threatened. She felt threatened a lot when we first met. I never knew why.

'What happened to the hair?' she retaliates.

'Stress,' I run a hand over my shaved scalp. 'It had to go.'

'You look so different.'

Admitting my own frailty has made her defensiveness lapse for just a moment, and it provides me with the opening I require; it was always easy to work Bev this way. I drop the bag at her feet and pull out the book.

'The Tears of Laughter,' I announce.

I pass the book over and she briefly thumbs through a few pages.

'I know it. The Fifth Axis banned it; used a virus to destroy the electronic versions, burnt every paper copy they could lay their hands on.'

Her forefinger is tracing the line of the scar beneath her hair. I imagine they did more damage to her than anyone suspects.

'Is it any good?' she asks.

'I only read the first couple of chapters on the flight,' I shrug. 'But that's not really the point, is it? That could well be the last copy in existence… and I'm prepared to sell it to the Braxiatel Collection. If we can agree on a price.'

I leave Bev, tuck the book safely back into my bag and stride out into the early morning sunshine. I've given her a day to think over my offer.

I kill a few hours by wandering through the gardens but, just when I think I've seen everything it has to offer, I catch sight of something very unexpected: stood amongst the flowerbeds is a red metal monstrosity. At first I think it's a machine, but then I notice several distinctive eyes squashed up against a glass visor and I realise that lurking somewhere inside that metal contraption is a Yesodi.

I'm even more surprised when it leans over and begins to prune the roses. I'm not the only one watching him. A man in a brightly coloured toga stands nearby, observing.

As well as gathering rare items, the Collection obviously attracts unusual people – wolves as construction workers, thieves as curators, and a pressure suited, radioactive jellyfish as a gardener.

Just for a moment I stop to ponder why Beverly Tarrant would make a home here on this bizarre world. But my thoughts are cut short.

Boo is stood by the greenhouse. The Killoran girl bares her fangs and stalks towards me. I can see the sharp edges of her claws extruding, catching the morning sun. Her clawed hands grab hold of my jacket.

'Boo, please, we're friends!'

'Friends? Ha!' She lifts me up, then drops me to the ground, pinning me down with a single hairy arm. 'You gave Miss Tarrant my number as a contact point. She left you a message. Said she's ready to talk about the book. You're trying to sell her the book!'

I can see the confusion in her big, wet eyes. She hates me, she owes me her life; but reason is being swept away by the young Killoran temper.

I call out to the man in the toga. He turns, but does not move to help.

Behind him, I see the Yesodi gardener lumber up. Its eyes are flicking back and forth behind the glass, considering whether or not to intervene.

'Help me!' I yell, because even monsters need a little encouragement. The suit clanks forward and does something with a garden rake that makes Boo squeal. Her clawed hands release their grip on me and I struggle to get out from under her – but suddenly she turns on the metal gardener, pulls him down into the fight, and now I'm being crushed under a thrashing mountain of fur and metal.

I wake up and everything is suddenly dazzling white. I'm in a narrow hospital room that smells of disinfectant. I struggle out of bed, painfully start pulling on my clothes before I realise that Beverly Tarrant is blocking the doorway. She's smouldering – in every sense of the word.

'The book…' I begin.

'After attacking you and ripping several parts from the pressure suit of Mister Hass, your assailant… attempted to eat it.'

Bev holds up the last copy of *The Tears of Laughter,* its pages torn and shredded by Killoran incisors. Saliva has blurred the ink; the words lost forever.

I feel numb. I've just lost more than she can possibly realise.

'More importantly, it turns out that you got through our security on a fake plasti-disc. And that's a problem. I've also had some messages

about some outstanding warrants and the company you've been keeping.' She consults a flipscreen. 'Primeiros. One of those little urban legends that sprung up after the Axis fell. A mess of feuding gangs and wannabe warlords, all ready to prey on the weak and the vulnerable.' She closes the screen. 'The cops busted an encrypted bank account a few weeks back, following cash being laundered through the art world. Your name cropped up on the account.

'Looks like the Primeiros were real after all. Looks like you could help Galactopol fill in a few blanks.'

Behind her looms the bulk of a Killoran male, most probably a security guard, he fills the doorway and stares at me with big, doom-laden eyes.

'Come on, Bev,' I plead. 'It's nothing we've haven't done before. Please, for old times sake, let it go. Let me go.'

'I can't.'

This isn't the Bev I know, this isn't the thief who would look the other way.

'You've really changed,' I snipe.

Bev smiles wryly.

'Doesn't what we had mean anything to you?' I ask her. Oddly, the Killoran security guard turns to look at Bev. His eyes are focused on her, as if she is the centre of his world.

'It meant nothing then, it means less than nothing now.' She's staring into the mid-distance, leaving me with the uncanny feeling that these comments are not for me alone. 'I don't even think I was capable of feeling anything back then.'

This isn't true – I've seen many sides of Beverly Tarrant, I've seen her dust herself down and smile after losing a fist fight, I've seen her raging against the bars of a prison cell and I've seen her curled up in a ball, sleeping naked on my bed – but I've never seen tears glimmer in her eyes before, not until now.

'Will he be pressing charges against Boudicca?' the Killoran asks her. 'It could jeopardise her placement here.'

'Her what?' I say.

'Her placement,' explains Bev. 'She's here on a sculptor scholarship. The Collection provides her with subsidised board and lodging and she gets to sit in on some lectures. She's very talented. Did you see the statue of Brax in the arrivals terminal? That's one of hers.'

I'm dumbstruck.

'No,' I mumble after what feels like an eternity. 'I won't press charges.'

'Security will be collecting you shortly,' mutters Bev softly. 'Come on, Adrian.'

She takes the Killoran's hairy claw and guides him through the

door, they pause on the threshold and she looks up into the monster's face. I've seen that look in her eyes before.

They find a small, brick room at the back of the Mansionhouse to act as a holding cell for me. Bev tells me Galactopol will arrive tomorrow.

Then she goes, without ever saying goodbye.

I'm expected to serve time in one of the lunar penal colonies – partly for the fake ID, partly for outstanding warrants for other offences. As art thieves we had always depended on secrecy, but as a Primeiro you let other people's fear keep your secrets for you.

Boo arrives late in the evening, agitated, claws running through the spikes of her hair.

'I never told them a thing,' she whispers.

'I know.'

These investigations, into the Primeiros. If you help, you might bargain a few years off your sentence…' She whispers, 'But if they knew about you working for the Fifth Axis before that, plundering artwork from the worlds they invaded, then they'd put you away for a lot longer.'

I turn my head to face the wall, unable to look at her. Our unspoken agreement never to talk about the past has clearly come to an end.

The words hurt. Most days I manage to forget the things I'd done and seen, the things I'd tolerated. The thing I'd become.

'It was a talent. And the Primeiros like talented people.' A pause, then I say, 'I don't know why you protect me.'

'You saved me from the detention camps.'

Three years ago, after months of Axis hospitality, she had been almost feral. It had been too much, even for me. I'd had her drafted into my raiding crew, an extra slave to sift through the rubble of the buildings we bombed.

Back then I kept a library of banned books in my office. A thief at heart, who knew each lost text would one day be a priceless treasure.

One night, woken by a strange sound, I found Boo reading one of the books. The unrecognisable noise that woke me had been the rare laughter of a broken girl.

Light in the darkness.

Towards the end of the war, the office was destroyed, my collection burnt. All except that one book she always kept close to her. Being the type of person I am, I took the book from her. Payment for her passage off-planet.

'Was your life with me any better than a detention camp?'

'Yes. But I'm still ashamed of it. Others fought and died for their freedom; I begged for scraps from your table.' There's a pause, and then she gets to the heart of the matter. 'Sooner or later someone

would have noticed the notation in the book, realized it was the copy from the Fifth Axis Ministry of Information. They'd have asked questions. They'd have found you out.' She pauses, tilts her head, her eyes glistening in the darkness. 'I don't want the people here to know about my past. I like it here. I've moved on with my life.'

Finally, amongst all the insanity of the Braxiatel Collection, this is a sentiment with which I can empathise. We all want to leave the past behind. I reach out and stroke the face behind the bars.

'You'll be okay,' I whisper. Somehow reassuring her makes me feel better.

She has done well since reluctantly handing me that book as the bombs fell. She climbed aboard a freighter and found a home and a future.

When the Fifth Axis fell apart, the gangs moved into the wreckage.

A deal here, a murder there, drugs and extortion. I had to make my way in that world, with whatever talent I had. At some point I must have made a choice. And suddenly I was working for them.

When you're blooded as a Primeiro, there's only one escape, only one thing that can get you out. Money.

The Tears of Laughter, the book Boo had treasured so much, had been my only hope.

On the other side of the bars, Boo holds up a parcel.

'Miss Tarrant gave me two of these, one for me, the other for you.'

She hands me the package through the bars. 'Said Irving made a trip months ago. Came back with a dozen of them. But ever since he left they've just been gathering dust.'

She looks at me sadly for a moment.

'Never come back here, Anton.'

Then she turns and disappears into the darkness. I sit down on the uncomfortable bunk, feeling numb inside, and stare at the package.

I slowly fold back the wrappings and extract a new, pristine copy of *The Tears of Laughter.*

And for some reason I start laughing – laughing so hard that I start to cry.

Perspectives: Tribal Reservations

Philip Purser-Hallard

'It's obvious,' Parasiel declared over the din of the student bar. The fact that they call themselves a *clan* suggests the family grouping – the tribe, essentially – is the default unit of humanity. Thus the whole history of civilisation is simply an interregnum between pre-and post-urban societies. Hey!'

Another body had jostled him in the press-and-heave, spilling his pint.

Turning, Parasiel saw Boudicca. They all knew about the fight she'd had with that visitor, and a moment's contemplation of her muscled forearms – and scarily spiked magenta hair – convinced him a slosh of Tyler's Folly wasn't worth jeopardising interspecies relations for.

Even if it was his favourite burgundy coat.

'Hi, Boo,' he added nonchalantly.

Meredith was smirking. 'You're so full of shit, Parasiel.' As his last ex but five (or was it six?), she considered it her civic duty to oppose him in any argument. 'We don't know anything about their social structure. They may not even be related. "Clan" is just a word; probably an artefact of the translation software.'

'Are you talking about those Quire people?' Boudicca asked. She sat down on the sofa between Meredith and Nitra, a giant cocktail goblet in one of her pink-clawed paws. 'I saw one of them the other day. The seminar before mine overran because this man turned up, pontificating at the politics students. Something about shadow-puppets, I think.'

'Shadow-puppets?' Nitra's interest was piqued. 'How come?'

'I don't know. He said politics was "casting shadows against a wall". I suppose it was some kind of metaphor, but it didn't mean anything to me. Their lecturer was being really polite, but she looked furious.'

'They're creepy,' complained de Borah, Nitra's current belle. She polished her left eye absently with a mandible. 'Creepy and like totally weird. One of them was in the Reading Room this morning, rearranging all the books according to some totally bizarre classification system. The Assistant Librarian was trying to put them all back, but the Quire guy kept saying his way made more sense. They were still at it when I left.'

'Which of them was that?' Parasiel asked.

'The two-tone guy. Bipedium?'

'Bifolium.' Parasiel filed the information away for later. 'And yours,

Boo?'

'Pass,' said the Killoran. 'He was bald and wrinkly, though.'

'Rubric, then.' One of the ones Parasiel had talked to at the reception, Rubric was the oldest of the Quire (assuming appearances were anything to go by), and generally assumed to be their leader.

'Why so interested, Parasiel?' asked Meredith. 'Planning a dissertation on them?'

'Oh,' he said casually, 'I had an encounter of my own yesterday. The young woman, Verso, sat in on my tutorial with Benny.'

To his annoyance, Nitra said, 'I can beat that. I had to babysit the little girl down in the Stacks. She needed to see the early quantum-processor collection for some reason. Does anyone know what they're actually *studying* here?'

Everyone shrugged. Parasiel said, 'They've shown an interest in pretty much everything that's collected, taught or researched here.'

He flicked his scarf over his shoulder (trying to ignore how it landed in someone's drink), and went on: 'Either they're generalists, or they're using an entirely novel set of conceptual categories. Bifolium's behaviour in the library might support that.'

'The kid was looking at old computers?' That was de Borah, her response times suffering from beer. 'But she's inside an egg.'

Nitra smirked. 'As soon as we were down there she climbed out of it.'

'See, *that's* weird.'

'It kind of hinges or something, I think – it's difficult to see down there. She wasn't very talkative about it.'

'Oh, they're training the kid up well,' Meredith agreed. 'She's got the stuffy, po-faced thing down nicely.'

'Again, I'm not so sure,' Parasiel said quickly. 'I think that may be simply a cultural difference which we're misinterpreting. Imagine how our manners might appear to an ancient Persian, say, or to a Cro-Magnon human. Remember as well that we've no idea how far in the future the Quire are from. In my tutorial –'

'Does anyone else want to dance?' Meredith said. 'Goddess, I do. Has the jukepod here got Cybernetic Death Junta?'

Much later, and much drunker, Parasiel found himself alone in the Marble Courtyard, and the general vicinity of the apartments assigned to the Collection's most prestigious guests. He wasn't at all sure how he'd ended up here – sure he was heading home when he left the bar – and now he had to work out what to do about it.

It would be very late by most people's standards, but light was splashing across the dizzying zigzags of marble pavement. It came from the apartments allocated to the Quire.

Yesterday's tutorial with Benny and Verso had been… intriguing. It had been Parasiel's first prolonged exposure to the posthumans, and he'd been impressed by Verso's gracefulness and dignity, as well as by her very evident intellect.

He'd made an impression too, or at least had reason to believe so.

During the cut-and-thrust of his and Bernice's discussion (a sparring, he liked to think, between intellectual equals), the Quire woman had looked him in the eye and asked, 'Has your family been significant in your life, Parasiel?'

Which, while not particularly apropos of what they'd been discussing (criticisms of Benny's paper on the ruins at Selizar, as it happened), suggested he'd at least got her attention.

At the time he'd been too startled to do more than stammer a reply, but later on – that morning, in fact, as he showered before lunch – he'd realised quite how penetrating the Quire woman's comment had been. It was his early upbringing – specifically, his parents' self-satisfied provincial certainties – which had made Parasiel so eager to unearth falsehoods and expose the truth, no matter where it led him.

Verso had taught Parasiel something new about himself. Bernice Summerfield might be an excellent tutor (not that he'd ever tell her so), but that was more than she'd ever managed.

Since then, he'd made it his latest research project to find out more about Verso's family background.

He seemed to be standing, now, at the door to the Quire apartments. Sounds from inside suggested that the clan were having either a violent argument or a bit of a knees-up. Whichever it was, it stopped the moment he knocked.

It was Colophon who answered the door. Where Rubric, the oldest clansman, was bald all over, Colophon was both the youngest male and the hairiest. Bifolium, the parti-coloured library reclassifier, came somewhere in the middle on both counts.

The hirsute clansman started at Parasiel as if he were an unknown and possibly indelicate medical condition, and said, 'Do you want to speak to us, Mr Parasiel?'

Embarrassment flooded Parasiel's mind suddenly, rendering him approximately half sober.

'Is Verso, er, at… home?' he managed. 'And may I speak to her?' he added, remembering that the Quire might overlook subtexts obvious to a human.

Unsmiling, Colophon nodded and vanished into the apartment.

Through the half-open door Parasiel's fuddled eyes could see some patterned drapes, a giant abstract hologram, and… surely those weren't monkeys?

'Parasiel?' Verso was there. She sounded slightly out of breath.

Something about his inebriated state brought out details in her which had eluded him before. In contrast to the other Quire, Verso had a pelt of silvery fur which continued even across her scalp, and the skin beneath had the colour, though not the sheen, of polished bronze. She had the most perfect lips he'd ever seen, and curves in some desperately interesting places.

Yesterday her right eye had been a chitinous sphere, rotating independently like a chameleon's. Tonight it was the twin of her left: large, oval, human, and of a blue so dark that it was almost black.

Except that for some reason the lids opened sideways.

'Um, your eye,' he said. 'It's changed.'

'Yes.'

Weird, but he could get used to it.

'You asked me about my family,' he blurted. 'And you were right.'

She raised an unimpeachable eyebrow.

'They've been the biggest single influence on my life. They followed this… outdated, *childish* mythology called the Angels' Way. I learned from them about the things that must be fought – authority, conformity, credulous superstition. The way they acted showed me how dangerous those can be. How vital it is we overturn that kind of cant.'

For just a moment, Verso's attentive expression reminded him of Bernice at her most sarcastic. (A sudden memory returned of Benny advising him: 'Parasiel, when trying to pull women you might want to bear in mind that some of us do have other interests than the sound of your voice.')

'Our families…' He was beginning to slow down. 'I'd never realised it before, how they define our adult selves. How important it is that we react against them. How lucky I was that mine were such… prats,' he finished limply.

Verso gave him a dazzling smile. She said, 'That's very interesting, Parasiel. Thank you.'

'Also, can I buy you dinner some time?' he asked. But by then she'd already closed the door.

Outside the Wall

Sin Deniz

From the Journal of Adrian Wall

The October sun shines between the columns of the temple, offers a peace that – although found on other buildings on the Collection – resonates most here. It has been a tough assignment, using many of the stones from the original building but I believe my team and I have excelled ourselves. We have studied the bricks, the way they were carved, and we have constructed everything that was missing. We have worked hard and our reward is a structure worthy of the Romans themselves.

The Emperor Wall would have been proud of this achievement.

The disappearance of Braxiatel has been met with relief by our team of builders. We need stability. The buildings, the people, thrive on it, and strange as it may sound, the air feels cleaner, fresher now our benefactor has departed.

Bev saw herself as his confidante – more so than Bernice – yet even she seems to have more freedom now.

A call comes in from the library – a problem with one of the walls – and loathe as I am to leave the temple, I like to see a problem with my own eyes before assigning a team member to it.

I inform my team that I will be back soon and walk to the library.

Entering the library, I am greeted by Raymond, the caretaker, and he takes my hand firmly (making sure to wipe it on his overalls first; what is this human tradition when greeting?) before informing me that the back wall, near the lift to the Deep Galleries, is showing some cracks and he is concerned this is a warning sign to structural damage.

I like Raymond. I like the way he holds the books within this building. A craftsman and his tools.

We venture towards the back of the library, Raymond explaining when he noticed the cracks and the formation of them, when I get a peculiar sensation of being watched. This is not unusual. Many of the staff have felt this since the arrival of the Quire, but they are not surreptitious and are easily located.

Libraries are the most private of public spaces. There is no talking, everyone devoted to their own researches, their heads down, finding worlds within the pages they are studying. Like the lake's surface on a still day, the ripple from any stone cast here is easily seen.

I look around sharply. Only to find no Quire, nothing unusual. I

realise that I have missed the last of Raymond's description and I apologise and beg him to repeat his diagnosis.

Raymond is visibly surprised by the advancement of the damage, making sense of the woefully inaccurate description that I have just been given. The cracks have spread several centimetres since he was last here a couple of hours ago and that is an incredible speed.

Placing my hand upon the wall, I can almost feel the movement, a vibration. The damage is in keeping with gravitational shifts the Collection has experienced before, though rarely has it been so acute.

I alert Bev to the problem and instruct Raymond to close the library today while a team checks this out.

Leaving the library, the feeling of being watched returns and I attempt to identify the source a little more discreetly this time. As I walk the library path back towards the temple, I notice, in the corner of my eye, a figure in a doorway. Still amidst the movement of the Collection. I can't make out the figure due to the shadow cast but it feels like he/she is focused on me.

I take a step towards the door and the second my direction changes, the figure retreats into the building. I consider following but what could I expect to find? This is probably nothing and we have already lost valuable daylight today.

Bev has decided to wear pigtails again; I remember once saying that they suited her and wonder if she has done this on purpose for my sake. Unfortunately the hair is a small thing and her mood says more about how she feels at the moment. She is pensive and furtive, looking over my shoulder more often than at me.

When I ask her though she acts as if nothing is wrong and wonders why I am being so paranoid. I think about telling her about my feelings of being watched, but what is there to tell?

Bev is curious about the temple. It's nice to see her taking so much interest in the project, but I can't help feeling that she just wants it finished so that the Quire can observe how well she is running the Collection. It has taken Bev a long time to feel at home here, and suddenly the responsibility for our work, safety and security rests on her shoulders.

There is more, too. We argued after the arrest of Anton. In those moments, watching him in his cell, there had been a connection between him and Bev. A history I could never know, one she did not want to tell.

She never wants to talk to me about her past. Always focused on the future; the feedback from Anton's testimony about these criminal gangs, the latest reports from the Mimsphere. Never the past.

There has always been a part of her that is walled off, inaccessible

to me.

She tells me that these gangsters, these Primeiros, had Anton finding things to steal or sell on all the worlds they looted. And Bev explains that she wonders how much we keep on the Collection that is worth stealing. She has asked Mahalia for a list, but Mahalia says only Braxiatel knew everything, and Bev is now exploring ways of locating every item in the Collection.

When I ask her about Anton, she snaps. *Why do you have to know everything about me? Can't you stand on your own?*

This building gives me a sense of the Collection growing; buildings immersed in history fill the planetoid. That the Collection survived the Axis is testament to the strength of the past. We keep looking forward, but it is only through understanding of what has gone before that we can improve and advance. The Axis couldn't see that, and failed.

I spent months in a cage because of the Axis. They saw only the wolf, not the man. During those times, we made our own pieces from wood and stone, played makeshift games of Perspective. We could build and so we were free.

Carving these stones gives me that same peace. It makes it all the better to be out in the sun, feeling the breeze through my fur, as I shout instructions and assist in lifting the finished bricks into place on the temple.

As I lift one of the bigger bricks for the structure, I again see a figure in the distance, out of clear sight.

This time they are well placed, the sun hindering my view. Again he/she moves away and now I am curious. Whatever I may have thought before, it does seem like someone is interested in my movements around the Collection.

The most likely explanation remains one of the Quire taking an interest in the temple. But for some reason. I can only think of Bev.

There was nobody watching me whilst we had lunch, and I have been followed both before and after. The thought seems ridiculous: what possible reason would Bev have for watching me? If she were concerned about the construction of the temple she would just ask me. I know that the Quire's presence has unnerved her, and the fact that Brax has gone has changed things immensely, but I can think of no reason why the shadow should be Bev. Why then do I feel certain it was her?

Here comes a sight for sore eyes (I can always tell when I have been privileged with time with Peter, as I pick up expressions that Benny and Jason seem fond of) as Benny is coming towards us, barefoot on the grass, walking as gracefully as ever. One reason that Peter's mother has this elegant posture is due to the fact that she has

absolutely no idea about it.

Benny begins with small talk about the temple. It hails from ancient Greece, and she believes there may be a tangential connection to a paper she is beginning to research. A history of time sensitives. Only she has asked these questions before, and there seems to be something else on her mind.

I shock her with my bluntness when I ask why she has come here today. Although a little taken aback. Benny is not easily ruffled and she mentions that she was on her way to ask if I would be willing to look after Peter later, but that her ulterior motive was regarding Bev.

We had all assumed life would be better without the Axis, but three years on we are only just finding out what has filled the void they left.

Like damage to foundations that only shows when the building itself begins to move. Benny believes there are dangerous times to come. It seems that I am not the only one that has noticed Bev's strange behaviour. Bernice is concerned that she may be taking on too much.

Even though I am curious myself, I make sure not to let on that I have noticed anything out of the ordinary with Bev. No matter how much I admire humans, some things cannot change. Loyalty to your mate pairing is one of them. Loyalty that will not allow me to discuss the situation with Benny, mainly because I believe my worries are unfounded.

Realising her work is done, Benny mentions that either Jason or herself will bring Peter round after nursery. She leaves, but not before giving me a trademark 'I know that you're lying but I am too proud and/or polite to point that out to you' look. I feel like I have betrayed Bev in some way but know it was unavoidable and that Benny doesn't actually know what it is that concerns me.

For once, Jason has been a responsible adult (not his strong point) and made sure that he and Peter are wearing protective clothing for the visit.

I was hard on Peter last month – impatient with his mastery of Perspective – and both he and I suffered for it. Benny's rage was justified and I was annoyed with myself. Too often I forget that Peter is only half-Killoran; he has similar passions, but is raised in a different world, a different culture.

Peter seems pleased to see me. Jason and I engage in some half-hearted pleasantries before he leaves me and my son to our afternoon together.

Peter makes me proud with his determination and inner strength; traits no doubt garnered from his mother. He picks bricks and carries them to other team members with a gleam in his eye that is hard not to answer with a hearty smile. Only half-Killoran, maybe, but stronger

than a human child.

He too, has learnt the buzz gained from building, from crafting. Too many people choose the easy path, destroying when they cannot create, have not the patience to learn, to master that which is within our grasp. Peter is learning, is developing and as a parent it is truly a wonderful sight.

And then there is that feeling again, someone behind Peter, enough out of my vision that I cannot tell who it is but near enough for me to register.

Peter complains that he has sore hands and I realise that he has forgotten to put on the gloves I gave him. I instruct him to get them from my toolbox and as he moves towards it, the figure retreats. It seems too large to be Bev.

My gut twists and an instinctual response makes me leap for Peter and knock him to the floor, shielding him with my body as his tiny hand begins to lift the tool box lid.

The explosion shakes the ground where we are and I tense, bracing against stones falling from the temple. There is the smell of singeing fur and pain in my back. I growl but dare not move, not until I know Peter is completely safe.

Luckily for us the blast area was small, and in truth only a few bricks fell from the construction. These lie around us, perilously close. My feeling, though, is that if one of these had killed us it would have been a lucky hit for this would-be assassin; the explosion was targeted at whoever was unfortunate enough to open the toolbox. My toolbox.

This is now turned from an uncomfortable feeling into a serious attempt on my life. I need to find this shadow I have been seeing all morning.

Peter is crying in my arms. There is a sick feeling in my stomach.

The knowledge he was in danger because of me.

I wave off those trying to help, gruffly explain it was one of my own blasting charges, accidentally triggered. Harder is calming my son by explaining that his father made a mistake and put one of his tools for building in the wrong box. Now I would have to replace all the tools missing and work extra hard.

Yes, I will visit soon and yes, I will be okay and no, it wasn't your fault my son, it was mine.

It was mine.

Arriving at Benny's, I am greeted by Jason, who seems surprised to see Peter again so soon. Jason looks sceptical at my fabricated story (not as stupid as he looks, clearly) but makes no move to argue, obviously having better things to do, and I make my way back to the temple to question my fellow workers.

Of course none of them saw anything out of the ordinary, not that I

expected anything different and I am left as mystified as before.

However now not only do I know that someone is indeed following me, but their intent is also perfectly clear.

I should talk to Bev. The security staff should be alerted. My hand is on the communicator when I remember. Bev's face, looking at Anton.

Their connection. Secrets. Walled off.

Can't you stand on your own?

And my hand drops away.

After working an extra couple of hours, I make my way back home, keeping an eye out for the stalker.

Whoever it was is now keeping well out of sight. Although I know that I am not the most popular resident of this particular planetoid, I cannot think of anyone I have angered enough for them to want me dead. I shouldn't be surprised after the Axis, but it is a disturbing thought that someone is willing to risk everything to make sure you no longer exist.

Reaching my door, I realise that someone else has been here. Like the library, I cannot pinpoint what alerts me, but I check the whole door before carefully using my disc to open it. It seems as though nothing has been tampered with, but I search the whole apartment twice before sitting down for dinner.

Finishing off my steak, I hear a sound outside the apartment and hesitantly move towards the door. A slip of paper has been pushed under. This is something I remember from human detective stories and a sudden rush of adrenalin hits me as I run out the door, knowing in my heart there will be no one there.

Returning to the apartment, I pick up the note, a piece of paper folded neatly into four. The message is typed and concise:

Yesterday you were careless
Today you were lucky
Tomorrow is another day
The clock is ticking

I examine the paper for clues, but there is none.

Much as I enjoyed the mystery within the crime stories I read, I could never figure out who the guilty party was. More often than not I was surprised by the outcome and now I am beginning to feel a little uncomfortable. They were just stories. Now my life may depend on identifying the culprit.

Sleep did not come easily last night and when it eventually took hold it was fleeting and fitful. The sense of being watched remained, strong

and uncomfortable. Killorans are pack animals. If there is a disagreement that cannot be resolved, the fight is clean and clear.

This underhanded, devious combat is alien to me. Assassination is commonplace among humans.

For all my efforts, I still don't understand them. I don't know how to deal with this, how to respond.

* * *

I join my team at the temple, yet work is the last thing on my mind.

Bev left two messages last night but I didn't respond, unwilling to have her around me till this is resolved.

I can't get into the work, wavering between pointing up brickwork and checking all around me for any sign of foul play. Neither are forthcoming and I begin to tire, both physically and mentally; I was not made for this type of thing, this is Bev's world, this is not me.

My biggest shock comes with Bev later in the afternoon.

She walks towards the temple, shielding her eyes from the autumn sun with her right hand. I wave in her direction and she gives me the merest of nods before looking right past me as though something else had caught her attention. I look around, trying to follow her gaze but even after several seconds focused gazing, I see nothing. Turning back, Bev has already disappeared.

Things do not get any better later that day as Benny comes to ask about Peter and yesterday's explosion. I try to give the same story about a blasting charge, but Benny is not swallowing it.

I feel so close to letting her know everything. But if Benny knew of my suspicions, she would do everything she could to find out who it was and stop them. Too dangerous. Peter needs his mother.

I carry on working until the early evening before giving way to fatigue, realising I am no good to anyone in this condition. I pack my (borrowed) tools up and make sure they are securely locked away before getting ready for home and bed.

As I approach my apartment block, I see Bev in the distance. For weeks she has been dressing in the attire of a modern businesswoman. She wears the same suit now, but the posture is wrong. She carries herself like a hunter, and is focusing on something nearer to my apartment. Something out of my line of sight.

All of a sudden Bev starts running and I realise I am going to lose sight of her very quickly. I force my body into a run and before long I am at the point where she disappeared, between two buildings.

I hear voices, a scuffle. As I turn the corner I see a Killoran stood over Bev, looking like he has unfinished business. Bev has a huge gash on her head but is resilient, brave, devastating as she lifts her head up

to her aggressor.

'As I said. Julius, you are under arrest for…'

Before Bev has a chance to finish her statement Julius grabs Bev, and in one fluid motion lifts and throws her against the wall before moving forward to finish this unfair duel.

Only as he does so, Julius sees me step into view and his direction changes as, with a growl, he leaps.

Killorans are pack animals. If there is a disagreement that cannot be resolved, the fight is clean and clear.

He is unfocused, driving towards me with wild aggression, no order or discipline. Following a slight feint I bring my arm under his muzzle, using his momentum against him and, as he falls backwards, I move in and crush his windpipe with my elbow; his eyes widen, before turning lifeless.

Turning back, Bev is pushing herself up off the floor, blood on her forehead.

Two guards appear at the end of the passage. Bev looks past me to them, mutters: 'You took your time.'

The doctor assures me that Bev's injuries are superficial.

Nonetheless, she tells me to go home and get some rest. I am easier to persuade due to the fact that it is Doctor Beroula taking care of Bev.

Beroula is another one of the Collection's oddities; the last in a race that has long since disappeared from the universe, her ways and mannerisms much like a Killoran's.

The Axis locked me in a cage because I was alien to them. It is left to Bev to explain to me that there are Killorans who feel the same way.

She comes to my apartment just an hour later, having discharged herself from Beroula's care. I ask about the cut on her forehead, and she tells me she has survived much worse.

There are Killorans who are angered by the fact that I was together with Benny. They hold the existence of Peter against me. Are furious I am now consorting with Bev.

Killorans are pack animals. But every pack has its rogue elements.

This group are against any 'tainting' of our race and see Peter as an abomination. Their mission was to kill me before disposing of Peter, to make sure that neither of us could pollute the Killoran race any longer.

Since the arrival of the Quire and the incident with the time corridor, Bev has ordered a closer watch on all transmissions around the Collection. Snippets of one such transmission – an encoded signal – were captured. Only two words were clear to read. My name.

I have been under surveillance ever since.

It was only last night, following the explosion, that Bev's security

team broke the code. Tracing key word patterns through the encryption protocols. The one that broke the code was ‘assassination’.

The rogue pack had sent two Killorans to the Collection to achieve that task.

Bev believes if she had told me of the plot then she couldn’t have trusted my acting abilities, relied on me to carry on as though I knew nothing about it. I explain to her that I am familiar with the concept of bait.

She believes her judgement has been validated by the capture of the first Killoran the previous evening. Although he hasn’t given them any information, some of the equipment that he had led them to Julius. It was only a communications failure that left her facing him alone.

My anger should subside as I see her animated face explain all the work she has put into trying to capture those that wanted me dead.

She has done all this because of her feelings for me. She did not want to see me hurt, went to great lengths to stop that from happening, even at risk to herself.

If there has been a plot to remove me from existence to keep my race ‘pure’ then the pack are unlikely to stop because two of their number have been apprehended.

I am just going to have to be much more careful from now on…

I should be grateful. But I think only of Peter. Of how close he came to dying in that booby-trap. How the only reason he was that close to danger is because Bev did not tell me of the transmission. Because I needed to stand on my own.

I try to understand humans more. I want to be closer to Bev. To know her. To bring down those walls.

But tonight all I can think of is my son.

For Maddoc – always follow your heart, my son

Key

Jonathan Blum

He was looking at the word, and it was like a door opened for him to see through. Now he could tell how the letters engraved on the golden tag fitted together, how the W was the *wha* on the beginning and the O and the L made an *all* and the rest put together made you go *see*, and he knew by looking at those letters and putting them together he was making them mean *their cat*.

It was the first word Peter knew he could read. It made him remember when Wolsey was still alive – curled up on his bed in a warm stripy ball, patiently letting Peter pick him up and carry him around the house, snoring softly in his ear when he woke up at midnight. And it was wonderful. He was proud because he could read, but more than that, he knew why Mummy had kept the nametags in the first place.

Reading could make you feel.

At school he showed Zack the word on the tag, and Zack just said,

'Your mum told you that.'

So Peter said, 'Nuh,' and Zack said, 'Your mummy told you everything and he made that sound really bad. Then he ran off to play kickball.

Zack was the coolest kid in the world, the best at kickball and had gold-patterned eyes that looked all shiny in his dark face. They said his dad got them for him. He'd asked Mummy if he could get eyes like Zack's, and she said he should get used to his own first.

Peter wished Zack liked him better.

He could just tell Keith, but Keith wasn't nearly as cool, he just hung around instead of being the leader. And he wished Zharlotte was still around, so he could tell her, but she didn't want anything to do with any of them any more. Last week she'd said school was for babies, and she was all into boys and make-up already. Daddy Adrian said her species grew up a lot faster than most people, and the next time he saw her she'd probably have grown her wings.

So he waited on the sidelines and looked for someone else to tell.

There was a second little disc on the same keyring with Wolsey's tag, a little pink plastic one like the door-pass they made Peter wear. He liked shaking them so they clinked together like when Wolsey ran or pounced and you could hear him from the other end of the apartment.

Uncle Jason had said they should get Peter a noisy tag like that so they'd know where he was, and Mummy had done that tired laugh and said he'd *never* need one.

So one day, in between trying to read things, he was flapping the tags as he ran around the living room. And when he got close to the front door he saw the little cat-flap in the bottom beep and zip open.

Which was cool, so he spent a bit of time moving the tag and making the panel flip open and shut. Then he wanted to go outside and see if it would open from out there.

But when he got his jacket and came back, the main door opened for him – the little one didn't. So he took off his jacket, but as he went past the door again the cat-flap opened. And that made him look at his jacket and his own little pink plastic pass clipped to it, and now that made sense too.

The little door would let Wolsey through, but not him.

And that meant the thing he could read wasn't just a word. It was a key that opened doors he couldn't open himself.

The next day he knew what he wanted to do. Reading wasn't fun enough for the other kids, but he knew what they'd like.

Their class was run by Big Mrs Krasnow, for all the kids who lived here who weren't old enough yet for full lessons, and today she'd brought them to the grassy bit near the cafe so they could run three-legged races. The sun was bright and sparkly, and everything smelled like cut grass and fresh coffee.

'Hey Maeve,' said Peter. 'Want to see something rogue?'

Maeve came running up, all the little whiskers round her eyes twitching with excitement.

'Come over later, we'll sneak off.'

'What about your uncle?'

'Kavachta,' said Peter, and Maeve snickered. He'd taught the other kids that, it was his special bad word, and none of the others knew what it meant but it sounded great when he said it.

'What're we sneaking off for?'

'An adventure.'

He wanted to get a bunch of the kids together, because that was how you did an adventure, and he'd be leading them and everything. But Zack said 'no way', and Maxx said he couldn't go without his mum, and Wajiwaj wanted to go but then he tripped and fell in the race and and the squishy bit of his head swelled up they had to get his mum-dad to take him home.

So it wasn't like a proper adventure because it was just him and Maeve and Keith, and Keith didn't really count 'cause he was always tagging along anyway. But it'd do.

Peter thought about asking the Quire girl – Incuna-something – to come along with them. They'd seen her around, and her glass egg thing looked fun. But when you talked to her, she was like a grown-up, only she wasn't grown-up because you could see what the grown-up Quire looked like and that wasn't her. Incuna-something always looked lonely, but she never made friends with them. And someone so boring wouldn't make for a good adventure.

Maeve got Big Mrs Krasnow to call one of her dads, and told him that she was going to play over at Peter's home. She was good for sneaking away – she had two different fathers who didn't live together, and three mothers who weren't even on the planet, and could always tell each of her dads she was going to the other one.

There were a lot of kids – like Zack and Maxx – who only had one mum and one dad and they lived together, and they must not have any fun. But part of Peter felt like he was the weird one, not them.

So after Big Mrs Krasnow walked them back to Peter's building, he told Uncle Jason they were going to play in the courtyard. Uncle Jason said it was fine, as long as he kept his coat on. Peter always had to have his jacket on 'cause it was always cold out for him – not the bad kind of cold like you usually got in November, but enough that it didn't feel right. Daddy Adrian said his fur hadn't grown in yet.

From the courtyard he led Maeve and Keith towards the little bit of woods around the back edge of their building. Maeve kept giggling.

She probably thought this was going to be like the time they'd done the I'll-show-you-mine-if-you'll-show-me-yours thing. (She'd thought he was funny-looking cause he didn't have enough tentacles, which he thought wasn't fair 'cause he knew Mummy didn't have *any.)*

But this time she stopped giggling when he showed her the gap in the fence near the tree, and once they had all squeezed through it was just a little way up the hill till they were out of their home neighbourhood, and looking up the hill at Uncle Brax's Palace.

Keith's eyes were all big and Maeve's whiskers were sticking straight out as he showed them Wolsey's tag. 'This is a key, and we're gonna find out what it opens.'

He didn't want to try the front door – someone would see and tell on them – so they went round until they found another door, a little one between two big stone blocks near the corner. This side of the palace went straight back for about five hundred miles, so there would be lots of stuff inside to explore.

They ran up to the door, but it didn't move. It was just a smooth flat plastic door, with no handle or anything. 'It's not happening,' said Keith.

Maeve was looking around like her dad was about to jump out and

grab her. ‘Come on, make it work.’

‘Here,’ said Peter, and took off his jacket with his tag on it.

They hid the jacket in the grass next to the stone. Then he walked back up to the door, holding out Wolsey’s tag, and waited. Slowly the door swung open, and they looked into a place that was big and tall and cool and dark.

Peter should have said ‘ta-da’ or something, but he looked inside and just forgot.

‘You go first,’ said Keith.

‘Let’s go together.’ He started inside, and it was only when he’d got past the door that he heard the *swish-thunk* of it slamming right behind him.

‘Hey!’ shouted Maeve through the door.

‘Ow,’ said Keith. He’d run in so fast he’d slipped and fallen over, up against a bunch of old dusty books on the nearest shelf, and as Peter looked down to either side he could see more shelves, like cliffs stretching off to the horizon.

He went back to the door, but it wouldn’t open. ‘Back up,’ he said.

And when Maeve had backed up, it opened again, and he stayed close to keep it open. Take your tag off,’ he said. ‘It won’t let you in if it doesn’t like your tag.’

So she took it off, but when she got close the door shut again anyway. ‘Now it won’t let me in ’cause I don’t have a tag at all!’

‘Uh,’ said Peter, and thought as hard as he could. ‘Maybe if you run?’

She backed up, and the door opened again, but as she ran up it zipped shut and the door went *thump* and Maeve went ‘oww’. He could hear her sniffling, but the door wouldn’t open because she was too close, and she got angry when he told her to back up.

‘Stop it!’ she shouted. ‘Let me in or I’m telling!’

‘I can’t,’ he shouted right back. She yelled something at him and when the door opened again it was because she was running away.

‘Is she gonna tell on us?’ asked Keith.

‘Nah,’ said Peter, and he tried not to think about it. ‘She’s no good on adventures anyway.’

This part of the Palace was called the STACKS, according to the big hanging sign, because everything was stacked up on the shelves.

Down the hall he could see lifts and stairs and rows and rows of shelves, and the hall went on like forever. It looked like a labbynith, like Mummy told him, but you didn’t want to go into a labbynith without a ball of string. So he looked around till he saw a sign with an arrow on it, and read that it said NEW ARRIVALS, which was good. He and Keith were new here, so they should follow the arrow.

At least Keith was impressed that he could read things. That was the best thing about the Collection, Mummy said it was full of everything from everywhere, right here, like having a whole Net you could touch. You could find out anything just by looking and reading.

And you could climb on things too.

They had to do the door-trick thing again. NEW ARRIVALS was full of things in stacks too, but these were more like piles. Everything was in clear force-boxes, with glowy labels on the side full of words.

The box on the floor in front of them had a statue of a naked human lady in it, propped up against a big wooden cabinet, but someone had broken off her arms. Maybe some bad kid did it and the arms were around here somewhere and *he* and Keith could put them back.

There were little wheeled lift things which you could stand on and push the foot-pedal, and they would lift up so you could see what was on top of the stacks. And really big things were hanging from the roof in force-nets too, like beagleflies and terrordactyls.

'What do you want to look at?' he asked Keith.

'What's where?'

None of it looked like it was in order, but that was okay. He could read what it was, and the whole planet was for people who wanted to read. That was why they came here, to read and look at old things.

Peter couldn't see why old things were more interesting than new things, but maybe the old people had already seen the new things.

'Let's find a drumset,' said Keith. 'I wanna play the drums.'

'I bet there's one for people with six arms.'

'Yeah! Cos we got four. And legs.'

But they forgot about the drumset while they were looking for it, there were just too many things on the way. There found a big fuzzy jumper like the one Mummy wore whenever she was going someplace cold and – with Keith's help – put it onto the statue, so she wouldn't be chilly even if she didn't have arms to dress up warm herself.

The box next to it was just a big old stone box with a label hanging off its side. He could work out ARK, OF, and THE, but the last word was a long one, and he would've given up except that Keith wanted to know.

'Conevant,' he said. 'This ark, it belongs to the Conevant.'

'What're they?'

Peter grinned. 'Oh, they're down. They've got big pointy heads, and they go like this *allauallauargl,* and if they catch you they sit on you and suck you up into their bodies…'

'Nuh-uh!'

'Uh-huh. And this was their ark, like Noah's ark, in the flood.'

'So they went in there?'

'Yeah, two of 'em.'

‘How’d they fit?’

‘… They’re squishy.’

Keith’s eyes were wide. ‘Are they still in there?’

Peter laughed. ‘It’s a museum.’

‘… So you wanna look in it?’

Peter looked at the box, imagining a couple of Conevant squished in there, ready to strike, just waiting for the lid to open. He kept staring till Keith asked again.

‘Nah,’ he said. ‘Let’s see what’s up *there…’*

* * *

It was fun telling stories like that, and Keith always believed everything. Peter got all his best stories from the ones Mummy told him. Every time she went away – and she was away an awful lot, like today – she came back with new stories for him, about far-off places and far-out people. And that made it all okay.

He loved when she came back when he had just gone to sleep. If he wasn’t awake enough for a story, she’d let him rest on her, so his face was up against that fluffy jumper, and she’d rock him back to sleep while whisper-singing her favourite lullaby. The one about how this old heart of mine was weak for you, how it had been broke a thousand times but it was all okay, ’cause I love you.

And every night when she was there she tucked him in, and rested her hand in his hair, and told him a different story about her and her friends. The way they’d dug up the bones of King Froggie, or fought the Nasties in Germany.

She had a whole bunch of friends in her stories, who sometimes sounded like they’d been real people and sometimes not – a rude lady pirate, a grumpy princess, a Very Green Knight, and a magician who could go anywhere and make anything happen.

Mummy’s stories were the best. Uncle Jason’s didn’t make nearly as much sense – he’d leave out bits-for-when-you’re-older – but he told neat when-I-was-your-age stories, even if Peter could tell when the bits he wasn’t talking about made him sad.

He said Earth was so big, but it sounded so small – all those people and so many more *places* than this world, but you only lived in a little tiny part of it and all the people looked the same, with no really different bits.

Daddy Adrian wasn’t so good with stories, but taught him great words. He was the one who’d said *kavachta,* that time he’d caught his finger while taking down Peter’s old cot.

It sounded so funny that Peter kept repeating it, and Daddy Adrian kneeled down next to him and told him not to say it where any grown-ups could hear and that meant it was only for kids to use

among themselves.

A lot later, when he finally got the nerve to ask what it meant, the skin round Daddy's snout crinkled in a really sneaky smile.

'It means "slugs' bottoms," he said. 'The sticky bits.' And he leaned in close, so his fur tickled Peter's face, and confided the rest of the secret. 'So it's not really very naughty. But you see, the *other* kids don't need to know that.'

Up there was a real live little spaceship, hanging from the ceiling – wicked curved like a manta-ray or flutterwing, with a nasty-looking gooseneck on the front ready to zap 'em. Keith wanted to see it up close, so Peter found one of the lift things and pushed it under the spaceship. By leaning hard on the pedals he was able to make the pole lift their little basket up next to it.

'Look! It's got buttons!' shouted Keith.

And there were buttons, a little cluster of them, and they lit up when you touched them, and then the hatch opened and it was like a big dark mouth.

Keith was staring inside. 'Well go on.'

'You go on,' said Peter.

'You get Maeve, let's make her go first.'

'Yeah.'

They would have stayed there forever just looking inside, except then the robot came in.

It was just a clunky old servicer, like a tea trolley with extra arms, but it was cruising down the walkways between all the stuff and heading for them. If they stayed up here, it'd see them and they'd get in trouble.

'C'mon,' Peter whispered. 'Hide.' Inside the ship it was dark, but there was enough light through the viewscreen for them to see. The ship was small, with only three seats, each big enough for them both to fit in the same one. Which they did, because standing in the pilot's seat was the only way to see out the front.

'He's not going this way,' said Peter. The robot was rolling down each aisle in the room, stopping at every item. Keith was leaning on the back of the seat, looking up at the headrest bit. It hung over the top of them, and the top bit was hollow like a helmet – with little cables wriggling around inside like worms. Keith was stretching up for a closer look.

'Don't do that,' whispered Peter. 'It'll suck your brain out.'

'Will not.'

'Will too. They got sharp pointy straws in there and they'll suck it right out.'

'Nuh-uh,' said Keith and hunched down over the instrument panel

instead.

The robot was taking forever, item to item, up and down on the lifts, reaching out and poking each thing with a little flash of light. Keith was watching it through a targeting-scope.

'Freeeeow,' said Keith. 'Pyeew pyeew pyeew bedooooooow.'

'We can't,' said Peter seriously. 'We'll get in trouble.'

The thing kept getting closer and closer, and when it got to their row Keith was just curled up in a ball. His eyes really big in the dark, and he looked like he was going to cry.

'Hey,' said Peter. 'I bet the guys who made this ship had a war with the Conevant. And they're who shot off the statue's arms.'

'A war? Who won?' asked Keith. And Peter started telling him a story about it, to keep him quiet. The people in the ship were the good guys and blew up lots of bad robots.

Then they heard the whine of the basket-lift outside. Peter grabbed Keith, and they hunched down in the pilot's foot-space. Peter held on to Keith because Keith needed holding on to.

They waited, and the basket-lift whined again, going back up this time. Then it went dark. The robot was outside, blocking out the light.

Peter only peeked for a second, but long enough to see the robot poke the side of the ship like it poked everything else. And then the basket-lift whined and it was gone.

They waited a bit, then watched out the front till it left out the door into the STACKS. Keith still looked scared, but Peter told him it was safe now. Only when they got to the hatch, the robot had taken the basket-lift back down with it. So there was nothing but a drop three floors straight down.

'We're stuck!' wailed Keith. But no one could hear him. He started screaming for help, but Peter shushed him.

'Let's figure it out ourselves. Like an adventure.'

'I don't want an adventure.' But Keith helped him look round the ship for ropes or something, only there wasn't anything. Peter tried waving Wolsey's tag at the controls, but it didn't do anything. They were stuck. They were really stuck. Nothing was doing anything and they were stuck.

'Okay,' said Peter. 'You can scream now.'

And they did.

It was forever before anyone came in. Peter had been yelling and crying and echoing around the room till he got tired, but when he saw Uncle Jason come in the door he started up all over again.

'Peter!' shouted Uncle Jason. 'Hang on, I'll be right there…'

And Peter just curled up in the hatch, squeezing the tears out so he could see, while Uncle Jason rode the basket-lift back up. He was

staring up at the ship and looking kind of scared himself.

'Oh, my God,' Uncle Jason was saying. 'You haven't touched anything in there?'

'It didn't do anything,' Peter sniffled.

'I bet Maeve *told,'* muttered Keith.

Uncle Jason grabbed him from the hatch, and held on to him tight as he started the lift back down. Usually he wanted piggyback rides from Uncle Jason, but this was more like a hug. He was close enough to feel Uncle Jason letting out a big breath himself. And that was good, it was okay now. Uncle Jason was a hero.

'Whew.' Uncle Jason put him down on the ground, and messed up his hair a bit. 'Sneaking off to steal a spaceship, huh? I'd think you got it from me…' He stood back up, and gave a weird look back up at the ship. 'But couldn't you have had better taste in rides?'

'Wan' go home.'

'Well, give me my leg back and we'll go.' Uncle Jason gently prised him off of the leg he was hugging and took his hand. 'You must've been worried, all alone in there.'

'Nuh. Keith was all scared but I was a big boy.'

Uncle Jason stopped, and looked confused. 'Who's Keith?'

'Keith,' said Peter. 'I told him a story and made him feel better.'

'You took someone else up there? Where is –'

'He's not here *now.'* Why couldn't grown-ups ever understand?

'Ohhhhhkay. Just let me just get something straight here. Is Keith… real?'

'Yeah. He's *Keith.* You know him.' He still didn't, so Peter reminded him. And that's when Uncle Jason got that weird look, like that time Peter had called him Daddy Jason instead, and Mummy had laughed at him and Daddy Adrian spilled his drink.

He hoisted Peter up again and held on to him all the way out of the room. With his other hand he had his flipscreen out. 'Hello, Bev? I've found him. But call Doggles. We've got temporal sh… tuff going on again. Really deep stuff.'

When they got home Daddy Adrian was huge and growly. Peter just stayed quiet and tried not to cry. But Daddy Adrian sounded even more angry at Uncle Jason than at him. Peter played Perspective in his room and listened.

'You wouldn't even have known he was gone if I hadn't come by!'

Adrian was shouting.

'Excuse me? Who thought of tracking the cat's tag while you were running circles in the stacks-'

A little while later and Uncle Jason was on the phone. 'Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Yeah. Right. Bye.' A silent bit. 'Well, Doggles says he's scanned

everything within ten thousand klicks, and there's nothing going on. No timebollocks, no psi-active artefacts, nothing. So, it's looking like Peter's imaginary friend actually is an imaginary friend.'

'And that's normal for you?' Daddy said.

'For human kids? Pretty much, yeah.'

A grumpy sigh. 'Back home we'd think his parents were depriving him. He'd be surrounded with enough other cubs that he didn't think to make one up.'

Uncle Jason was changing the subject. 'What I want to know is, how did he know about Keith?'

'Who *is* Keith?' demanded Daddy Adrian.

There was another silent bit, and Uncle Jason's voice got too low to hear.

It was Mummy who'd first told Peter about Keith.

It was one of those nights when they went out after putting him to bed, and he woke up when he heard them come back. Mummy was singing stuff that didn't make any sense and they were giggling. She came in to check on him, and started telling him another story as he went back to sleep. A lot of it didn't make too much sense, and she seemed to know that, and she kept saying something about the party they'd been at. But some bits of it he'd never forget.

'And we got to see him once. One of those time-travel-weird-possibility things. This baby just appeared out of nowhere, and he was the one Uncle Jason and I were going to have some day. We knew it. Back then we were just married, and we were so sure of it. His name was Keith. Keith Brannigan Kane Summerfield. Summerfield Kane. I forget which. He would've been your half-brother, you know that? Except that you probably wouldn't have…

'Oh, anyway. He was a beautiful little toddler, and he was a big smelly bum, and he was the first time I ever changed a nappy in anger. And I loved him utterly for about a day.'

A long, sad pause.

'And he disappeared again. Went back to whatever future he came from. And later on I got to see the man he was supposed to grow up into, sort of, I think. And sometimes I think he's still going to happen some day, and sometimes I think he's all in my imagination, and why is it so bad to imagine anyway?'

* * *

Now he could hear Mummy's voice through the door. Back home from her trip, but she didn't come to see him. They seemed angry at Mummy too, and that wasn't okay.

'Why did the sodding cat have access to New Arrivals anyway –'

‘So he could keep me company when I was working, all right? And we never cancelled the codes after Clarissa…’

‘Oh, I don’t believe this…’

‘It’s not like the pass would’ve let him in anywhere that wasn’t safe –’

‘That was a Martian war machine up there! It could’ve sucked Peter’s brain out!’

‘It’s a museum piece. Brax would’ve taken the core –’

‘I don’t *know* any more,’ shouted Uncle Jason, and nobody said anything for a while after that. Peter leant against the cool plastic door, trying not to breathe too loud.

‘Look at everything that’s happened here,’ Uncle Jason was saying, all thick and tight. ‘Look at the news reports or the stuff on Bev’s desk. “Safe” is just the set-up for a punchline.’

Mummy didn’t answer.

‘He’ll be safer with more supervision,’ growled Daddy Adrian, and Uncle Jason started to argue back, but Mummy’s ‘One at a time’ cut them off. Then she went on, slowly, shaky but strong.

‘You’re right, something nasty could leap out of any corner. And it has. But we’re still here. And that’s what Peter needs, more than he needs to be kept safe from every little thing.’ Her voice was stronger now. If there’s a key to it all, it’s what we give him. What kind of world do we want him to imagine? A mean one that you have to avoid? Or one he can face with his family and friends to help him?’

She thumped her hand firmly on the table. ‘And if raising my son to believe that is the only chance I’ve got to blow a raspberry back at a hostile universe, then all I can say is… *thlbptttt.’*

Peter giggled. He could hear Uncle Jason trying not to snicker, and a wave of relief from Mummy, and a low building rumble that had to be Daddy Adrian.

‘He needs to know things can be okay anyway,’ Mummy said eventually. ‘Because if the world never turned round and bit you, I wouldn’t have Peter.’ A pause, and now Mummy was sounding as shaky as Uncle Jason again. ‘If life worked like that, that just means we’d be worrying about protecting Keith.’ And then they were silent for a long time.

Later on they came to tuck him in. Uncle Jason messed his hair up and Daddy Adrian smoothed it back down. Then it was just him and Mummy.

‘Hey,’ she said.

She had on her travelling jumper, the big woolly one. It felt so good against his skin. When she hugged him she always bent over funny, like she’d never worked out where all the bits should go.

Peter knew the tough bit was coming.

She let go and looked at him with tired raccoon eyes. ‘We’re going to have to punish you, you know that. But not for going off and exploring. For doing it without telling any grown-ups where you were going.’

He was glad she didn’t treat him like a baby. She’d always talked to him like he was as big as her. ‘From now on when you have your friends over, it’s back to the way it used to be. You can’t play in the courtyard without one of us right nearby. Until we say otherwise. Got that?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘And if you want to go exploring, you have to tell us, so we can decide how close we need to be.’

He nodded. ‘I just wanted to go read everything all by myself,’ he said.

‘I know, I know.’ She took a deep breath, and hesitated, sad and serious. ‘When I was young I spent as much time as possible trying to sneak around whenever I could.’ She looked at him, gave him a big hug all over again. ‘How could I *ever* blame you for wanting to have an adventure on your own?’

She hung on to him for a long time, like she needed the hug for herself.

When she let go, she let him rest against her chest, and went on all businesslike now. ‘Now then. I have a lot of trips away planned, which means from now on, you’ll be staying with Daddy Adrian instead. Not because Uncle Jason doesn’t love you, but because there will always be people who love you looking after you. Because there are just too many of us. And when I’m home, you’ll see me all the time and stay over and keep toys here and everything. You got that?’

‘Uh huh,’ he said.

‘Oh, and one other thing,’ she said, and hesitated. ‘You do know Keith wasn’t really, well, there… right?’

‘Course. You told me he was just my half brother.’

‘So?’

‘So he’s not *that* half.’

Mummy just looked at him for a bit. ‘Well of *course*,’ she said. And then she got all up-close and whispered she had something to give him. ‘Just between us, all right? You and me against the world.’

And she reached into her pocket, and took out a little chain. And on the chain were Wolsey’s tags.

‘I’ll have to give you a flipscreen too,’ she said, as she fastened it round his neck. ‘So the next time you get stuck you can call us.’ She finished with the clasp and smiled. ‘So now you can have your adventures. And I’ll be there when you get in trouble.’

Peter needed a word for what he was feeling but didn’t have one

yet.

'Keep it close to your skin,' she said, tucking it into his pyjamas.

'The way I do with mine.'

'You've got one?'

'Mm-hm,' she said, with a big secrety smile.

And she tugged at the big woolly jumper, and reached down it, and showed him the chain she'd been wearing round her neck all this time. 'This is a key too.' It was a little flat piece of metal, shaped like a shield with some engraving on it, and it was warm and cool and alive in his hand.

'What's it a key to?'

'The door that changed my life,' she said.

'The lady pirate,' Peter said. 'And the grumpy princess and the knight and the magician?'

Mummy said nothing. But he looked in her eyes, and it was like another little door opened inside. Because he knew every one of her stories was true.

The Inconstant Gallery

James Swallow

There was a stillness here that Bev Tarrant found oddly compelling. In the Aina Gallery it was always tranquil, in a shabby, faded sort of way. Her footsteps left flat echoes down the cloister-like corridors. It had a forgotten sense to it, a vague melancholy that reminded Bev of old attics, dusty and disordered.

Some decorative alcoves held artworks, others were colonised by thin, patient spiders. Paintings in and out of packing crates lined the walls, propped against one another, safety foam pooled about them.

Someone would get to them eventually, take them to where they should be.

Tarrant wondered if Braxiatel had a catalogue of all the abandoned objects-in-waiting here; with his absence, the Aina Gallery remained an overlooked arcade of misplaced things, at a remove from the chic end of the Collection.

She could almost fool herself into thinking that she was alone.

Almost. There were occasional sounds of work from anterooms off the corridor; inside them the low-rent research projects. Dull and unexciting undertakings Brax had judged too dreary for inclusion in the main buildings.

Here was where Braxiatel sent the things that were just interesting enough to keep out of the stacks, but not interesting enough to put on full show. The slightly lacklustre things. People passed it every day on the path to the hamlet, saw it out of the corner of their eye. The stand of firs partly obscured the chapel-like construct, but the Aina Gallery had a way of being ignored in plain sight.

Bev liked that. It was a quiet oasis, away from her unending stream of duties administering the Collection's affairs. She'd found it by mistake; now once in a while, Bev would let herself drift here without really thinking about it.

Just to take a moment, you understand. Just for a breather.

It wasn't like she was trying to get away from anything. It was just a place where she could *unwind*, lose herself in the piled high clutter.

Meandering from thing to thing, wondering where they had come from. Forgetting – not really forgetting, but just putting aside for a little while – the knot of tension surrounding the big issues in her life.

The future. Brax. Adrian. Someone else's little boy.

Her fingers wandered across an open box, its contents a mixture.

Bonestone carvings from Coralee, a near-mint copy of *The Cling*

Peach Cookbook, some Flanian pobblebeads. She fished out a large object and ran her palm over the fluted shape. Bev recognised a Gagrantian death lantern from a tombworld in the Narvaji cluster. She had once acquired similar pieces from a storehouse on Shaden for an art historian AI. A wan smile crossed her face as she remembered. A good caper.

The smile faded. Those days seemed very distant. They belonged to a fiction, to an unreal incarnation of Bev Tarrant. After Anton, before she'd started really making a name in this time.

She carefully replaced the lantern and walked on.

She'd had to learn to forget about the future, to live in the here and now. It was the here and now that found the chink in her reverie and flowed through. Mundane issues: import taxes, cargo bills. She frowned, displeased the concerns of the Collection had reached here.

Bev turned a corner, drawing up short to avoid bumping into a wall.

She rocked back a step, glanced around. Wrong turn? Bev was sure the corridor here branched, but there was only a dead end; bland, off-brown stonework. She tapped it with a finger. It was out of place; not a new addition, just incorrect. Like the architect had abandoned his work and allowed someone less talented to carry on. At the edges of her thoughts there was a sense of invasion

Bev's face soured and she turned on her heel, dismissing the idea.

Her relaxed mood was diminishing and she strode back the way she had come, trying to hold it together. In the entrance hall a group of Killorans were moving large crates off an antigravity dolly.

Adrian Wall had his back to her, directing his men with snarling grunts and gestures from his furred fist. Bev tried not to miss a step as she saw him. He turned and she saw that familiar softening around his eyes, the slight tension about his jaw. 'Bev. I didn't realise you were here.'

She played at being all business. 'Doing an inventory thing.' She threw a nod at the crates. 'What's this?'

'Rifkind asked if we could help. These are new acquisitions.' Adrian offered her a datapad, but Bev didn't take it. 'Too heavy for anyone else to lift.'

She saw a scribble of words on the screen, saw Brax's authorisation codes. These containers had been cleared months ago; why were they turning up now?

The Killoran shifted uncomfortably, gave his team a sideways glance. Bev continued, clipped and practical. 'Let's see what we have.'

The containers were smartplastic, lids melting back into the frame as Bev tapped the control spot on the cases. She leaned closer, examined the contents.

Adrian lowered his voice. 'I tried to call you earlier.'

Bev made a wordless noise of agreement. She'd turned off her comms the moment she entered the gallery.

'We, ah.' The Killoran hesitated. They had been in a curious kind of limbo with recent events, their relationship caught in a strange attract-repel pattern that had yet to settle back into a comfortable rhythm. 'Could we meet this evening? Cafe Vosta? We've not talked recently.'

'That's true,' Bev offered. She felt an odd, directionless annoyance at him that was hard to quantify. Part of it was the ongoing irritation.

His efforts to please her, to be someone he thought she wanted.

Trying to be so bloody human with that diary of his, and who had he got that idea from, she didn't need to wonder. The one time he'd shown her some pages, it had almost sounded like someone else. So considered, so doubtful. So much of the strength she saw wasn't there.

Suddenly so uneasy in his own skin.

But right now, it was more his appearance in the gallery. She only wanted time to herself, was that so bad? Time to think. Time not to think.

Adrian stumbled on, his discomfort strengthening. After the attempt on his life, Wall had become more circumspect about parading his liaison with Tarrant in public. She let him find his way under the passive gazes of the other Killorans. 'Perhaps I could make dinner? Peter's agreeable company, if you indulge him…'

Bev peeled away a layer of protective gel. The dart of jealousy she felt was surprising; so old, but still sharp. With Bernice away so much, was it any surprise Adrian wanted his son to live with him?

Jason Kane was hardly qualified as caregiver; god knew, Bev was still trying to find a job he could do on the Collection.

Only that did little to ease her feelings. It wasn't possible to look at Peter and not see Bernice or the easy closeness between father and son. To feel left out.

She revealed a curve of mottled crystal inside the case.

'Hello,' said Bev.

Adrian tapped delicately at the datapad with a claw. 'Anonymous donation, made through the Vooti Cultural Exchange. From a pre-Empire culture in the Spinward Marches, a –'

'Varde Sphere,' finished Bev.

With care, she reached under the object and lifted it out. The orb was the size of a basketball, a globe of deep blue glass. 'These are quantum sculptures. Quite rare to find one intact.' Bev flicked the ball with her finger and it hummed. 'The artistic intent is encoded in the crystal lattice on a molecular level, or something.'

'You've seen these before?'

She peered closely. There were recognisable flaws in the matrix, a

distinctive slash along the globe's equator. A smile crossed her lips.

'Only this one.'

Memory crowded in. Labyrinthine tunnels of brown stone. The bob of her torch. The hot pain in her stomach from the knife wound.

'It's from a planet called Cirkel,' he offered.

Bev nodded. 'I know. That's where I stole it from.'

Adrian excused himself with some half-hearted pretext, leaving Bev to walk across the ornamental gardens toward the Mansionhouse.

The moment he apologised and left, she felt like a complete bitch. It was still awkward for him to have a relationship with her, still trying too hard. But instead of helping him find his way through it, she once again stood by and let him flail. In the moments when he wasn't around it was easy to see her own small cruelty, but when he was there she found it impossible not to play into the same patterns. That directionless anger again; she couldn't aim it at Benny or Peter so she turned it on Adrian. But she couldn't keep punishing him for having had a life before her.

'Your pardon?'

Bev turned to see Hass, down on one knee among a bed of Ascintan feather-tulips, and realised that she had been thinking out loud. The Yesodi's armoured form of brass plates and pistons whirred and hissed. Orange light spilled from the faceplate, three eyespots drifting about behind it. 'Hey,' she managed, covering quickly. 'You don't have to bow before me.'

Hass worked with fine motions, thick metal fingers tamping down earth around the flower stems. 'Useful to know.' The gardener got to his feet with a chorus of clicks, like a Knight of old Terran mythology.

'Arise, Sir Hass,' Bev joked lamely.

To her surprise, he inclined his head. 'Milady.' He brushed dirt from his breastplate. 'Have you addressed my complaints regarding the Quire?' Hass asked, changing tack.

'Remind me?'

'They seem to find me interesting. I frequently encounter them observing from the cover of bushes. When I approach, they depart at speed. Several plants have suffered as a by-product of their hasty egress.' He gave a fizzy sigh. 'I'd like it to stop.'

'I'll get to that,' she said. It wasn't the first complaint she'd had about their guests, and – on present form – probably wouldn't be the last. 'I've been busy with…' She jerked her thumb at the gallery. 'New acquisitions. Some choice pieces. A Varde Sphere.'

'Indeed? I am familiar with those devices. I have a brood sibling who studies xenocrystallography.'

Bev sniffed. 'It's a piece of art, not a device.'

‘I disagree,’ Hass moved to another flowerbed and gave it a gentle watering. ‘The spheres are constructed objects. They perform a function if properly utilised. The resonance patterns within them –’

‘I thought plants were your speciality.’

He paused, drawing attention to her interruption. ‘The growth of complex crystalline matrices shares many points of similarity with plant husbandry.’ There was a rustle in the bushes nearby. Hass glanced towards them.

‘Have you ever seen one?’ Bev asked, following his look.

‘No.’

‘It’s strange,’ she said, sauntering around the gardener. ‘The piece that just arrived. I saw it once before, a long time ago.’ She raised an eyebrow, ‘By the way, the member of the Quire who was bothering you?’ Her arm shot out, plunging into the bushes, then yanking back.

‘He look anything like that?’

It was the two-toned one, the chest of his toga balled up in Bev’s fist.

Hass inclined his head. ‘My thanks.’ He turned to Bifolium. ‘Please take more care with the gardens.’ And then he picked up his watering can and moved off.

Bev released her hold on the Quire. There was a moment of stillness, then he stepped fully out of the bushes, smoothing down his robe. ‘My apologies,’ Bifolium said. ‘Our understanding of the Collection is not yet complete.’

Bev said nothing.

Bifolium looked at her. ‘The clan understands you have an interesting history. You do not originate from this time period.’

‘Temporal displacement,’ Bev answered. ‘Happens more than you think.’

‘And, of course, you were a thief,’ Bifolium said.

Bev looked at him. His voice hadn’t changed at all, still the same superior, annoyingly neutral tones the Quire used every time they stepped out of their apartment. But there was a hint of something in his eyes, the way he held himself. Something that said he understood a bit more than the others.

‘Thief is one way to describe it, yes.’

‘The sphere you mentioned. You stole it.’

Not a question. Unaware, her hand strayed to her stomach, to a point a half-inch below her ribcage. ‘I recovered the sphere from some nondescript scientists on Cirkel. A commission from a collector called Damask. He was very precise about his needs. You’d like him.’

‘Recovered.’ Bifolium repeated the word without weight.

She gave him a tight smile. ‘I’m not sure why I’m telling you this.’

Shadows danced across his chequered skin. ‘Because it will not have

any affect on my opinion of you, perhaps?' The characteristic Quire bluntness was refreshing in a coarse kind of way.

'I was stabbed as I escaped with it. I still have the scar.' Her hand dropped away. There was something about him. Approachable, different to the others. The body language probably. She should ask Summerfield. 'Almost bled to death in my starhopper,' she continued.

'Funny. I look back on that and all I can think of is how aware I was of my own life. Of how *alive* I was.' She licked dry lips. 'Isn't it peculiar, that this object arrives here, today? In front of me?'

'From one perspective, the universe is nothing more than a series of coincidences.'

'I don't follow you.'

Bifolium tilted his head to one side. 'You talk about nearly dying in a sordid manner with an expression you would classify as fondness.

From your perspective, the universe is showing the sphere to you now to discourage you from viewing the past –' he tapped his left eye, and Bev could see a ruby coloured lens '– through rose-tinted glasses.'

He turned then, studying the gardens for a moment before picking a safe path back through the flowerbeds.

Bev watched him go. Rose-tinted glasses. They needed to dial down the humour in the translators.

Bev decided to forget about the sculpture and the gallery for the rest of the day. She would make serious headway through the mountains of work on her desk, instead of engaging in ridiculous displacement behaviours that were stopping things from getting done.

A communique about the Primeiro investigations; Galactopol were starting to move in and break up their networks. Which just meant there'd be more criminals looking for a new home or place to rob.

She'd acquired a load of quantum tagging technology a few weeks back, had set drones to work cataloguing the Collection. But it was all going to take time.

On top of that, there was a request from some idiot university to visit, although quite how an entire university could visit, she didn't know. And then the latest piece of oh-not-so-sexist Draconian chest-puffing.

Then she put in a call to Summerfield.

'A Varde Sphere,' said Benny, light years making the subspace link crackle with interference, 'Oh yeah. I saw one once in a reliquary on Moab. Big paperweight thing.'

'Brax never mentioned it, but he was obviously the one who had it brought here.' Bev chewed her lip and looked at the holoscreen without really looking at it. Benny made her think of Peter and Peter made her think of Adrian. 'I'm just wondering.'

Summerfield shrugged. ‘What, that Brax initiated some complex scheme to bring this particular artefact to the Collection just so you’d happen to find it and go through some hitherto unimagined life-changing experience?’ She blinked. Okay, so not beyond the realms of possibility, but sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. Coincidences do happen in our world.’

‘From one perspective.’ The lack of confidence fairly oozed from the phrase. ‘How are things where you are?’

‘Oh, proceeding swimmingly. The Yar and the Quotile have agreed to stop fighting long enough for me to recover our cargo pods, but they’ve had reports of Mim raiders, so I have to go sublight to get there. Let Adrian know he’ll have Peter for a bit longer.’

‘Fine.’ Bev didn’t mean to snap, but she did.

The narrowing in Benny’s eyes showed she had caught it. ‘If it helps, I could put out some feelers. I know Damask. I’ll find out if he’s behind the anonymous donation. Put this to bed, eh?’

She nodded, taking advantage of Benny’s misreading. ‘I’d appreciate that. Stay safe.’

The archaeologist threw her a wink and the image faded.

In the role of administrative head (acting) of the Braxiatel Collection, it was within Bev Tarrant’s purview to have transport at her disposal, a flyer or a robo-rickshaw from the spaceport. But instead of riding back to the hamlet, she walked. She made this not-choice in a not-really-thinking-about-it sort of way, packing up as the afternoon waned, a goodbye nod to a couple of people on the veranda, then strolling down the pathway. Past the gardens. Around the folly. And suddenly, as if it were a surprise, she was approaching the firs near the Aina Gallery.

If she didn’t press it too hard, Bev could almost accept she’d come this way by accident.

She lingered by the door, eyes shut, as her better judgement intervened for an instant; but then she was closing it behind her.

Savouring the stillness.

Bev opened her eyes and the beginnings of her calming mood went away.

She took steps across the hallway and her footfalls were heavy and dead. The echoes were muted, feeble. Bev shivered, suddenly out of place. In the wan light of the fading day, the gallery seemed different, smaller.

The connection, the sense of comfortable fit inside the building was no longer here. Bev felt a pang of sadness, of irritation.

She walked on, looking for the smartplastic boxes. Unpleasant familiarity tickled at the back of her neck. Peering into alcoves and

through doors, Bev saw nothing of interest, just more spaces of brownish walls bereft of the warmth she associated with this place.

She felt as if she were seeing beneath a veil, revealing hollowness beneath the gallery's careworn facade.

It made her think of Cirkel. A warren of mud-coloured tunnels. A palpable sense of threat. A younger Bev Tarrant's adrenalin high.

Convinced it would be easy. Rolling the sphere off the quartz plinth.

And then the pain.

'It's Miss Tarrant, isn't it?'

She snapped out of the reverie quick enough to make her giddy.

There was an older man approaching, a face of sky-blue skin and jowls. He was wearing a lab coat.

'Yes, uh, Mister…?'

'Dr Lakene,' he replied absently. 'Are you unwell?'

Bev dredged the man's name up from the snowdrifts of paperwork she'd seen. A Stomari researcher, some long-range transmat project.

She'd signed off on his permits some time ago. Bev recalled Doggles snorting with derision at the mention of him; Lakene's work had a reputation for its lengthy duration and lack of results.

'Doctor, yes,' she said, giving him a flat smile. 'I'm fine.'

Lakene touched her arm, very gently. 'You seem unsteady. Would you like a sip of water? My lab is just down here –'

'No,' Bev shrugged off the moment, used the impetus to stride back toward the entrance. 'Thank you, but I'm fine. Good night, Doctor.'

Lakene watched her go, frowning.

When Bev reached her rooms, she kicked off her shoes before slumping on her bed, opening the way to a fitful night's sleep.

Adrian eyed the clock on the cafe wall, turned the mug in front of him around in a morose circle. Lateness wasn't something Bev Tarrant was capable of, not in the casual way some humans were tardy. She was too controlled for that.

She wasn't here because she didn't care to be.

Amid the various coffee blends he smelled Jason Kane, and glanced up to see the man coming closer. 'Adrian, hey.' He looked at the empty chair opposite the Killoran. 'Uh, Bev…?'

Adrian's eyes narrowed.

Kane took this as an invitation and sat. 'Stood up, eh? Never mind. I'm in the same boat. When your other half's working, what can you do?' He sipped at his own drink. 'How's the renovation going?'

'It's going,' said the Killoran. 'There's are problems with the foundations on the bridge.' Subsidence was threatening an ornamental span across the moon pool. 'I've tried using lighter stone but it hasn't helped.'

‘I thought you were all about brute force,’ Jason continued. ‘That’s always worked for me.’ He paused and his face fell a little. ‘Actually, that’s not true…’

Adrian nursed the cup. ‘I’ve tried to vary my techniques lately. Without success.’

They were silent for a moment. ‘How’s Peter?’

‘Good,’ the Killoran gave a rueful half-grin. ‘Sleeping now.’

‘You’re lucky to have him.’ Kane looked down. ‘Some people don’t get to make that choice.’ It sounded like the words caught a little in his throat.

‘Choice,’ Adrian rumbled. Was that what this was all about? Was Bev’s distance her way of showing that to him? ‘Is there a choice between my son and –’

A strident crash cut into his words, the two of them on their feet instantly. Across from the cafe a lifter was on its side, the load pallet on its back spilt over the pathway. Adrian and Jason moved to help the angry blue man struggling to recover the cargo.

‘Indolent machine!’ he snapped.

‘Hey! Doctor Lakene, right?’ Kane waved. ‘Need a hand?’

Lakene’s face soured. ‘Be careful! This equipment is vital!’

Jason picked at a box that had fallen open. ‘Is it? What have you got in here, office supplies? Electromatic-format computing modules?’

Adrian righted the lifter. ‘Those are a decade old,’ he noted.

The Stomari man snatched the box from Kane’s hands. ‘I know money is tight,’ Jason continued, ‘but we can do better than second-hand supplies.’

‘I don’t expect you to understand!’ snapped Lakene. He kicked the robot into motion and followed it away, muttering.

‘Weirdo,’ opined Jason and threw Adrian a look. ‘What were we talking about?’

The Killoran looked glum. ‘Masonry.’

Shrill beeping dragged Bev into the morning. With languid footsteps she went to the comm-unit, stabbed the answer key. Bernice’s head formed in front of her and made a face.

‘Sleep in your clothes?’

‘Of course not,’ she lied. ‘What is it, Benny?’

The moment’s hesitation told her it was not good news. ‘Damask’s dead. Killed on his yacht during a botched robbery. Been that way for more than a year, so he couldn’t have donated the thingy.’

Tarrant frowned. ‘You said a robbery. Was the sphere stolen?’

‘Hard to know for sure, considering Damask’s boat is at the bottom of the Kipsel Sea, but I have another lead. Shall I keep digging?’

The doorbell rang and drew Bev’s attention . ‘Yes,’ she said, cutting

the line.

Adrian filled the entrance, along with the faint odour of beer. ‘You didn’t come to the cafe last night,’ he began.

Bev frowned. ‘I’m sorry. It slipped my mind. I had an early night…’

‘You’ve been spending a lot of time at the gallery. We have to talk.’

She still had her hand on the door. ‘Can’t this wait?’

‘No.’ He said it louder than he meant to. ‘No,’ he lowered his voice.

‘It’s important. I have to ask you something.’ He swayed.

‘You’ve been drinking.’

‘No.’ Adrian blinked. ‘Yes. With Jason. That’s not what I have to say.’

‘I thought you had a son to look after. Aren’t you too responsible now to go on drinking binges?’

‘Peter, yes. It wasn’t a binge.’ He tapped his fingers together. ‘No, look. Bev…’

‘Adrian, I don’t have time for this!’ She was closing the door.

‘Do you still want a relationship with me?’ blurted the Killoran, blocking it with his paw.

‘What?’

‘Do you –’

Bev felt herself go hot with anger. ‘Oh, for pity’s sake! What do I want? I *don’t* want another drama! I have a commitment to managing the Collection, and if you can’t see that –’

‘That is not –’

‘You have a commitment to your son –’

‘Yes, but you –’

And then the door slammed, leaving them both unsure who had actually closed it.

She went back to the gallery. Not to get away. Just for some peace.

For a moment’s quiet.

It should have been lighter inside, the solar glow entering via the glass dome overhead.

But the dome was made of brown rock, rough-hewn and obdurate.

An icy chill prickled her bare arms. If she looked hard she could still see it, still make out the vague shape of the Aina Gallery’s walls and floors and ceilings, concealed inside the thick rock, the catacombs that had replaced hallways. Dry stone scuffed underfoot where there had been dusty marble a day ago. The cool smell of old bookshops was gone, a blood-warm closeness in the air. *She knew this place.*

Old memory drew her on. Then Bev’s rational mind caught up to her and in a flutter of panic she turned around. Go back. Find the door. Get out.

The tunnels bent away from her. None of them seemed right, every

path equally wrong. Tarrant screwed her eyes shut, tried to concentrate.

What was going on? No time to worry about that now. *What was happening to the gallery?* Escape first. *Don't I know this place?* You have the Collection! *A duty and obligation?* Find a path!

Bev's lips were dry. The atmosphere drained the moisture from your body. She remembered. From the last time she had been here.

On Cirkel.

She fought panic. It came in waves, rising and falling against her self-control. She had a very real sense of the gallery turning against her, fear blending with betrayal. The Collection was rejecting her.

How dare she think that she could replace Braxiatel? She stumbled the wrong way – brown dust marking her hands as she felt along the irregular walls – deeper into the labyrinth.

'Miss Tarrant!' She turned, saw the Stomari scientist there, Lakene.

His face was flushed a dark cobalt. 'It's lucky I found you! Quickly, come with me!'

Bev let him lead her into an alcove. Once it had been the entrance into one of the gallery's inner rooms; now it looked like a small cavern.

'This place,' she hissed, finding her voice, 'how is this possible?'

Adrian swallowed two Hair-O'-The-Dog tablets, then two more just to be certain. He massaged the sides of his face; the fur matted, tacky.

The apartment was quiet. Peter was at school, and Adrian winced with guilt about making the child leave without his morning farewell.

The holoscreen chimed and he stepped closer. *External Subspace Signal.*

Not Bev, then. A message from off-Collection. 'Yes?'

'Adrian? I'm trying to reach Bev. She's not picking up. Is she with you?'

'Benny. Hello.' He frowned. 'No.'

'Ah.' Bernice knew him well. That single syllable told him she had instantly inferred the current state of the Tarrant-Wall relationship.

'Well. I have something for her. She wanted me to track down a donation, a Varde Sphere? I pulled a picture of the person who gave it to the Vooti.' The face on the screen reformed. 'This is him. He specifically asked for it to be given to the Braxiatel Collection.'

Adrian blinked owlishly at the grainy tri-d still of a blue-skinned man. 'Lakene?'

'Oh, you know him?'

Ice formed in Adrian's stomach. *Peter reaching for his toolbox.* He severed the connection before Benny could speak. The Gallery wasn't far; no more than two minutes if he ran.

Lakene pressed her into the room. She took in the scientist's workspace and gawped. Equipment was everywhere, elderly computer modules and energy transfer gear. Desks with papers upon them, a single writing stylus, a cup of tea.

'It's my experiments, I'm afraid,' he said, in a conversational tone.

'The resonance field from the teleportal has a morphogenic effect on the building.' Lakene smirked. 'It's sort of a latent imprint, you see? A quantum after-image.'

'But this is Cirkel. It's Cirkel, but it can't be.' The barrier between this moment and the decade-old memory became thin, porous.

'Exactly the same.'

And it was. Down to the stained workbenches, the precise angle of the pen, even the smell of the air. Deja vu was so total it was uncanny. She looked to where she knew she would see the Varde Sphere, atop a quartz plinth. Patterns of white light glistened through its surface, projecting a faint halo against the far wall. *The portal?*

Her stomach tightened.

'You stole the sphere,' Lakene was saying, his voice hardening, 'even though you had no idea what it was you were taking from us. From me.'

She blinked, trying to hold on to her sense of place. 'You were there?'

'It's not some ridiculous piece of art!' The Stomari grew strident.

'We had plans! The quantum matrix… It was the perfect stabilising element for her transmat experiments. Not that a thief would have understood that!'

'Damask said –'

'He lied!' Lakene spat. The scientist worked a console and the flow of energy surged. 'When you took the sphere, the teleportal collapsed! My wife… My wife was in there when it happened!'

'No.' Bev shook her head. 'I…'

'They couldn't get her back. She's still trapped, frozen at the event horizon!' He took a menacing step towards her, his fist dipping into a pocket. 'I'm going to repeat the experiment, you see? Everything is identical, even you! Everything has to be the same as it was. It will work this time…'

She held up her hands. 'I never knew… I almost died that day…'

Bev touched the site of the old scar and remembered. The figure in a hazmat hood; a flash of an angry blue face; the hard, cold pain of the blade.

'It has to be the same!' Lakene lurched forward, a knife in his fist, bright and sharp, stronger than he looked. He stabbed her, pushing steel into her gut.

‘Hey, Adrian,’ said Parasiel, ‘can you –’

The Killoran didn’t slow down, just knocked the student out of his way, pounding down the path.

He could see the firs now, just a little farther ahead.

She slid down the rough wall, all the little pieces of memory coming back as one, a riptide of sensation dragging her down.

– and she was there.

Bev left the drives warm on the starhopper, the flight brain on standby.

The only smart thing she did that day.

A drone-munition sat on the central power conduit feeding the tunnel complex, its detonator remote was wired into her glove. Damask wanted the piece quickly, and she’d needed the job, even if it meant an extraction from a live location instead of going in at night An ex-Spacefleet fadecloak made her virtually invisible, but only in the moments when it didn’t pop-fizz or reveal inappropriate colourations. It was enough to get her to the chamber, though. Past the nondescript menials shuffling at their duties. In and through.

She saw the gaggle of scientists fooling around in the halo of light streaming from the Varde Sphere. She didn’t care what they were doing, only that they were far enough away.

She laughed, actually laughed as she tabbed the detonator.

Things happened all at once. A distant crack of explosions. Alarms.

Screaming and a peculiar tremble in the air, like storm pressure. Ozone and confusion. Darkness.

But not for Bev.

She discarded the cloak, toggled her low-light optics. Reaching for the sphere to roll it off the plinth, hands cupping it, guiding it into a net bag.

Smirking. An island in the sea of panic.

She turned, broke into a run. The path back to the ship burned into her brain, just moments away.

The figure was indistinct and angry, just the impression of a hood and metal in his hand.

They met like dancers, blossoms of pain. She put him down – he wasn’t a fighter – hit him and left him there. And ran.

It was only as the adrenalin crash swept through that Bev felt the cold burn in her belly. The warm wet on her g-suit. And pain, coiling up, coming on like fire.

– she snapped back and found herself on the floor.

‘It was you,’ Bev gasped, each breath like razors. ‘You did it. On Cirkel’

‘Yes,’ Lakene murmured. ‘We can begin.’ He unfurled the plastic hood from his coat and donned it. She recognised him now, now it was too late.

‘It won’t work!’ she shouted, her eyesight blurring. ‘You can’t duplicate… Conditions! Not on the quantum level. It was too late the second I took the sphere. Too much has changed. You’re older… So am I…’ Bev gagged at the smell of her own blood, the coppery stink in her nostrils. ‘Different…’

‘They couldn’t save her, but I will.’ He was so cold, lost in his anger.

In that starhopper, Bev had bled and bled. It was only the chance passage of a patrol cutter that had saved her. In those hours, she had remembered nothing but the blurry form of her assailant, the sense of him.

A face hidden behind shiny plastic. The furious eyes. The colour of a servant’s uniform…

‘I will.’ Lakene repeated the affirmation like a mantra, ‘I will.’

‘You weren’t one of them.’ The realisation trickled from her lips.

‘Stomari are a cadre-based species… Scientist clans don’t marry. You weren’t one of them. You… Assistant? A servant?’

Lakene rounded on her, the ice breaking, i *loved her!’* he shouted,

‘It doesn’t matter what we were! She would have loved me! *She would have!’*

‘You won’t get her back…’ Bev coughed. ‘You’ll just kill me.’

She saw a shape moving behind him.

‘I don’t care about you!’ he retorted.

‘I do,’ said the shape, and with the flat of his palm Adrian Wall swatted Lakene away. The Stomari crashed into a cabinet and shrieked. Adrian’s face filled Bev’s hazy vision. Lupine features tight with dread. ‘I smelled your blood.’

‘Sorry. Sorry,’ she managed. Bev felt herself fading, coming apart like drifts of sand.

‘Ssh.’ He gathered her up. ‘Don’t speak.’

Adrian was aware of Lakene as he dragged himself up, tears streaking his face. ‘You’ve ruined it, you stupid animal! Out! Get out!’ He scrambled around, frantic as he tried to replace the items knocked aside in his fall.

The Killoran held Bev tightly, her breathing shallow against his chest.

Lakene lurched towards the glowing Varde Sphere. ‘You tainted the experiment! I –’

The man’s fingers gave the surface of the object the very slightest of touches, and there was a flat clap of sound; air suddenly rushing in to fill the vacuum generated as Lakene’s body vanished.

Adrian ignored the Stomari’s clothes as they fluttered to the ground, launched himself into another run.

People saw them coming and this time they cleared a path. They were cresting the shallow hill near the infirmary when Bev spoke

again.

'Do you love me?' The words were thick and breathy. In spite of himself, Adrian almost stumbled. Bev had a bunch of his chest hair in her fist and she was staring at him with intensity.

The answer came on its own. 'I don't have any choice.' A strange kind of smile pulled at his lips. 'It's like a force of nature. I can't resist it.'

He lurched to a halt outside the building, lowering her onto a waiting gurney.

'But Peter. Peter more.'

'No,' Adrian panted. 'Not more. *Differently.'*

'Oh,' she replied, as they took her away. 'That's fine.'

Varicoloured bottles of pop, cheese sandwiches and fruit were spread across the picnic blanket in an orderly manner. Adrian made Peter chuckle by using them to build little towers.

The boy glanced away, to Bev, to her stomach. 'Does it still hurt?'

'A bit,' she admitted, pausing in her reading. 'But I'll get better.'

Peter nodded sagely. 'That's good. Daddy gets sad otherwise.' He helped himself to a sandwich.

Bev returned to paging through the datapad. The latest quote from Chester Industries. First, the Primeiros, then what had happened with Adrian, and now her. The quantum tags would help protect the exhibits, but security was still a real issue.

The Killoran nodded at the trees behind them. 'The Aina Gallery lay on the other side. The building's original form is reasserting itself, now that Lakene is, uh, gone.'

She didn't look up. 'I haven't been back inside.'

'I'm not sure what happened to him.'

Bev made a note next to one entry. 'Hass has a theory, of all people. He suggested the sphere's quantum matrix has the ability to reorder matter, based on patterns from its original location.'

'It remembers the places it has been?' Adrian accepted this with a grunt. 'As good an explanation as any. Doesn't tell us where Lakene went, though.'

She glanced at him. 'Same place as his "wife", maybe?' Bev blew out a breath. 'That would be an interesting relationship to watch develop.'

At that moment, Peter looked up at Bev and grinned, a genuine smile as infectious as it was bright.

'Every relationship is interesting,' noted Adrian.

'Yes.' She sniffed the air, luxuriating in the ease of the day for a moment. 'Two things. One, no more diary. I want Adrian Wall, not the human version he thinks I want.' He opened his mouth to protest, but before he could speak, she continued: 'Two, when you get back to

work, I want you to clear out the gallery and shut it.'

His eyes narrowed. 'Are you sure?'

'It's time to move forward,' she told him. 'Close the door on the past.'

Peter handed her a bottle of juice and she took it with a wink.

Perspectives: Quire as Folk

Philip Purser-Hallard

‘I’m not sure about this, Bev,’ said Adrian as the Quire’s apartments holoed up, eighth-size, in the centre of Bev’s office. These people are supposed to be our guests. And how do we know what technology they’ve got with them? They might have brought something that could demolish the whole Collection, just in case.’

‘Precisely,’ said his partner grimly. ‘I’m not so keen on taking things on trust right now. We need to keep them under surveillance, just to be sure.’

In the holographic room wall-hangings, in a closely patterned fabric familiar from the clansmen’s clothing, obscured the original fittings. The tiny clansmen, as tall as Adrian’s ankles, stood, sat and knelt there, frozen by the recording.

When Bev had asked Adrian to see this – in a quiet moment at the Christmas party – she’d told him of her first suspicions about the Quire. When the posthuman scholars first arrived, there had been five minutes where they’d briefly been in the frame for the apparitions of Braxiatel which had manifested at the same time.

‘It seems to me like they’re not people we should be upsetting,’ he ventured. ‘Like by spying on them.’.

Bev shrugged. ‘Not my idea.’

She’d told him how surprised she’d been, when checking the security logs to discover that the visitors’ apartments were under constant visual surveillance. ‘Brax invited them; presumably Brax thought they needed an eye kept on them.’

By her account, though, that had been as nothing compared to her surprise when she actually watched the footage.

‘Anyway,’ she said, ‘that’s all beside the point. This isn’t anything dangerous – at least, I don’t think so. It’s just… very, very weird. To be honest, Adrian, I need someone else to see it so I don’t feel I’m going mad.’

She thumbed a button on her remote. The miniature Quire popped into life.

RUBRIC Hello, Colophon. What did you do today?

COLOPHON I studied the Braxiatel Collection’s Ormand-Seltec flyers, Rubric. They go fast! Whoosh! Zoom!

RUBRIC That’s very good. What did you do, Bifolium?

BIFOLIUM I interviewed the head of the Metabiological Faculty,

Rubric. She was boring.

VERSO What did you talk to her about, Bifolium?

BIFOLIUM Metabiology, dummy. T'choh!

COLOPHON Look, everybody, I'm an Ormand-Seltec flyer! Zoom! Neeeow!

VERSO Can I be an Ormand-Seltec flyer too, Colophon?

BIFOLIUM Verso's a dummy.

VERSO Am not!

RUBRIC Please don't play Ormand-Seltec flyers in here, Colophon. You might knock something over.

COLOPHON Look at me! Whoosh – oh, bugger.

RUBRIC I told you! I told you you'd knock something over, and you did!

Bev paused the playback. 'Catching flies, Wall?' she asked him.

Adrian closed his mouth, shook his shaggy head. 'You're wrong.

That's not just weird, that's…' Words failed him.

'Don't worry, I reacted the same way.'

'Grown-ups don't act like that,' he pointed out lamely.

Drily, Bev said, 'At that point, Incunabula was discussing the merits of femto-formalist historiography with Professor Myers.'

'Were they… well, high or something?'

'They start behaving like that as soon as they get in. As soon as they leave they snap back to what passes for normal. So no, unless it's some drug in the air that acts instantly and purges instantly as well. Except that they also snap to normal if anyone turns up at the door.'

'They're *always* like that?'

'Whenever they're alone together. Want to see what's happening at the moment?' She checked a screen. 'Right now, Rubric's sitting in on Dr Plempth's seminar, and Colophon, for some reason, has decided to dismantle the coffee machine in the spaceport staff canteen. That leaves Dorso, Verso, Bifolium and Incunabula.'

She called up the current feed.

DORSO – eye out at once, young lady!

INCUNABULA Shan't.

DORSO It's for cellular microscopy. You don't need it to eat your dinner!

INCUNABULA Incunabula use microscope eye on dinner.

DORSO You'll give yourself a headache, stupid child.

INCUNABULA Incunabula *want* headache.

DORSO *Then* who'll have to look after you? It's all me, me, me with you, isn't it?

INCUNABULA See pretty protein fibres.

DORSO All right, I'll take your dinner away.

INCUNABULA No!

DORSO Yes, if you don't give me back that eye!

INCUNABULA Give back dinner!

DORSO Don't like it when you don't get your own way, do you? Well, tough.

INCUNABULA Dinner!

DORSO No! Get back in your globe!

INCUNABULA Waaaaaah!

BIFOLIUM Please keep the noise down, both of you, we're trying –

Bev muted the holo. 'That's those two on a good day,' she said.

Adrian felt quite upset.

Of course he knew all this behaviour must have common foundation. Dorso's behaviour with Incunabula was just one pillar of the structure… but it was still nasty to watch a child treated that way.

'I thought Dorso would be a better mother,' he said.

'At least we know more about the eye thing now,' Bev said. 'Do you want to see more from the archive?'

'Just a minute. What are the other two doing?'

Bev zoomed: one corner of the holographic room ballooned until it filled the office.

The antique furniture had been augmented with three beautiful, intricately carved wooden chests. 'Those boxes followed them through the time corridor,' she said.

In front of one of these knelt Bifolium and Verso. Above their heads, a hologram within the hologram – a structure like a coral, or a circulatory system – rotated through various dimensions, branching in response to their gestures.

'I think the box projects the image. There's always one or two of them there, fiddling with it. I've shown it to some of the academics, Felix and his pals. They're guessing it's a representation of the Quire's research, but – usual story – nobody's been able to make any sense of it. For all we know it's their tribal god.'

'Okay. And what are the things in the curtains?'

'Well spotted.' Bev homed in on one of the wall-hangings, where hand-sized creatures could be seen scurrying. 'I think they're some kind of animal servitor. They do the housework – cleaning, food preparation, that sort of thing. They look like monkeys till you zoom in close, and then you realise they look pretty much exactly like the Quire.

'Anyway,' she said, and thumbed the remote again. 'This was last Tuesday.'

RUBRIC There are two kinds of people, Bifolium. Stoats and

millipedes.

BIFOLIUM Are there llamas, Rubric?

RUBRIC There are no llamas. You must decide whether you are a stoat or a millipede.

BIFOLIUM I'm a millipede! Look at my many legs!

VERSO I'm a millipede too!

RUBRIC Millipedes are those who, when they see a snail – no, I mean a quail…

DORSO Stop it, Verso! You're treading on my toes!

VERSO Shan't. You're a meanie.

BIFOLIUM Dorso's a meanie!

RUBRIC Unlike stoats, Bifolium, millipedes…

VERSO We're millipedes!

BIFOLIUM And we know what millipedes do to meanies.

VERSO Yes! We – what do millipedes do to meanies, Bifolium?

BIFOLIUM We tickle them!

VERSO Yes, we tickle them!

DORSO Don't tickle me. I don't want to be tickled!

BIFOLIUM Tickle tickle tickle!

VERSO Tickle tickle tickle!

Adrian watched in stupefaction as the tiny Quire chased Dorso round their scaled-down apartment, stopping only after they'd overturned and smashed a priceless antique clock.

There was a tune going through his head. After a while he realised it was the theme from one of Peter's favourite cartoons.

'I can see why Braxiatel wanted tabs kept on them,' he said at last.

'We're going to have to bill them when they leave, aren't we?'

Cabinets of Curiosities

Mags L. Halliday

‘When I was a little bit of a girl I stepped into the Hall of Mirrors and it changed my life. It inspired me, set me along the path to here and now. That’s what this exhibition, *Cabinets of Curiosities,* is really about, ladies and gentlemen. It’s about changing lives. From someone working passage stopping over, to the honeymooners taking the Grand Tour, to the rich and the poor. *Cabinets* is free to *all,* not just the select invited by the Collection. What is a collection if it does not inspire, intrigue? If it is not shared, viewed, enjoyed?’

Mahalia steps back, letting the focus return to Bev Tarrant, impeccable at the centre of the Hall. Bev smiles and gestures towards the French windows and the twilit gardens beyond. The Hall’s hundreds of candle flames reflect in its mirror and glass, are echoed by dancing lights strung through the avenues of trees leading down to the gently glowing exhibition Pavilions.

The weather machines had finally come good, catching the mood with a thick blanket of January snow.

‘So welcome to the first in a landmark series of exhibitions by the Braxiatel Collection. Please feel free to explore all the Pavilions, and remember Professor Cruixley will be inaugurating our series of free talks shortly in the Amber Room.’

‘Hopefully without any freaky side effects,’ Jason leans over to mutter to Mahalia and she shudders.

Two months earlier, Mahalia Nkansah Hernandez had been slowly pacing the empty Hall of Mirrors.

Thirty-two years earlier, she’d been born and raised on a freelance cargo ship hauling loads from one arse end of the core planets to the other. And in the long hours, as her mother half-dozed in the pilot’s chair, her father would tell her tales from Earth as he re-plaited her rows into complex patterns. Any time they stopped on a planet that had anything worth investigating, he would take her to the museums and galleries whilst Mama got the ship turned round. They’d started to specialise in shipping antiques. Nothing really fine, just decent stuff which one dealer on Tehnos wanted to get to another on Kalima, or a dealer on Kalima wanted to get to a client on Las Islas Fortunate.

Young Mahalia’s knowledge had been an asset, amusing the clients and winning their trust. And one day they’d got a contract to ship stuff to a collection. The Collection. After so many years, the legendary

Braxiatel had finally found somewhere large enough to keep all his treasures. It had been in a massive storehouse on the edge of a spaceport then – all crated up and secure in stacked cargo containers – but young Mahalia had accompanied Mama when she went to finalise payments.

You learned a lot, learned it fast, when you grew up calling a speck of metal in the vacuum home. One of the things Mahalia had learnt was never try to open a locked door. Doors tended to be locked for a good reason. So one thing Mahalia did when she was planetside was to open every door she could. So, as Mama talked to the stern lady with glasses about manifests, Mahalia opened doors.

Inside one of the cargo carriers was a room. Clear glass mirrors sparkled, even though there was no light to reflect, and gilt glowed like sunshine. She had stood in the centre, fascinated. Then she began talking to herself with the solemnity of a guidebot. Braxiatel had found her there, delighted by her knowledge of ancient Earth architecture. He had led her back to her mother, given her sweets that tasted like the dawn, and said when she grew up she should become a curator.

Twenty-five years later, she was in the Hall of Mirrors again; the full expanse of the room rather than the reduced version she'd first seen.

Seventy-five metres long, with seventeen long arched windows facing matching Venetian glass mirrors and dozens of crystal chandeliers.

Ms Tarrant clearly thought her visitors should get the intimidating wait before a meeting.

Mahalia, though, had spent six months inspecting the Hall for damage after the Axis had pulled out. That much time going over gilt and glass made you immune to its grandeur. Pacing the room she imagined glimpses of Braxiatel and her younger self, a tiny dark smudge amidst the light, reflected in the edges.

'Mahalia? Please, come through.'

Mahalia shook Bev's proffered hand as they walked into the Chamber of War at the end of the Hall. A low modern desk, its top mostly bare, was set to face the doorway, matching easy chairs arranged around it. Everything was neat and ordered, apart from the man slouching in one of the chairs, who was nursing his head and sprawling.

'Mahalia, this is Jason Kane. Jason, this is Mahalia Nkansah Hernandez, Head of the Curatorial Department.'

Jason waved a desultory hand towards her, his eyes opening to give her a brief, old-fashioned onceover then closing again.

Mahalia sat, listened as Bev gave what sounded like a standard spiel about how the Collection not only had to recover from Braxiatel's

departure but had to be seen to be recovered. Bev was checking with all the Heads of the all the Departments –

'Seventeen, so far,' Jason interjected dolefully.

She wanted to find out their ideas on how to reinstate the Collection's reputation.

'You manage the Collection's conservation, correct? Make sure the artefacts are kept in good condition?'

'And authorise loans, plan exhibits for the Aina Gallery…' She cut herself off, everyone knew about Tarrant and the Gallery now.

'So, any immediate ideas?'

Mahalia thought of her childhood wonder.

'The Collection is known for being the best, but also for keeping its treasures hidden, invite-only. So why not hold an exhibition? Not open up all the doors but show the finest objects in the Collection to the universe.'

'But even if I did agree to reopen the Gallery –'

Mahalia shook her head. 'I was thinking a Pavilion, like the old World Fairs on Earth: a temporary gallery in the grounds.'

Bev leaned forward, eyes calculating. 'We could have a grand opening, obviously. A media splash, get the senior politicos and such onside, then charge… no… no charge. Free admission – recoup the costs via the usual tourist traps. Accommodation, shuttle rides, souvenirs –'

'Beer,' Jason suggested.

'Was that a suggestion, or a request?' Bev asked.

Jason shrugged. 'Both.'

Mahalia ignored them. Braxiatel had been a good boss, letting her get on with her job, but his reclusive act had niggled her, denied her vocation. She didn't just want to care privately for the vast racks of artefacts, she wanted to enthuse about their meaning, impart their stories. Her requests to hold public exhibitions had always been turned down. Now was never the time, he had said.

'We should make the rooms of the exhibition part of the show,'

Mahalia enthused. 'So people don't just come to see the stuff within, but the actual fabric as well. Like the Hall of Mirrors: people are desperate to see it. And we've got other rooms in the stacks: the Garden of Harrowmad, a Sslaqui room, the "lost" Amber room. Use them to structure it, then fill them with objects. And every single thing coming from the famously secretive Braxiatel Collection.'

Bev nodded.

'You're on. And you can have Jason here to help.'

By the time Mahalia was back at her office, her assistants were already there, summoned. Judy was flipping through oversize books

on a worktable, listing things to trace. Ekantika was calling up a map of the stacks on Mahalia's deskscreen. Mahalia waved away their congratulations.

'I'm gonna need to talk to Adrian Wall, Jus from publicity, and Marcia in Ents. Hass because we'll need the gardens…'

Ekantika was scribbling notes on her flipscreen ready to arrange meetings. Jason wandered into the room, hands in his pockets, like a kid warned sternly not to touch.

'This is Jason: he's here to help.'

Judy cocked her head at him. 'How?'

Jason shrugged, then flashed a grin. 'Tell you what: you do whatever it is you do and just let me know when the opening night booze arrives.'

'The first thing,' Mahalia said, 'is track down the objects.'

'Isn't there a catalogue for that?'

Mahalia stepped up to the worktable, started looking over Judy's lists.

'Yep,' she told Jason. 'But it's mostly in Braxiatel's head. What we see of the Collection is actually about five per cent of the full catalogue: the rest is stored in the stacks, using a system only Brax knew.'

'Ah. But the library works well enough.'

'You think? How many times have you opened a document box to find a different thing inside from what you expected?'

'Well, never. Due to not being a student.'

'It happens, all the time. Now imagine that with dismantled buildings.'

'So we have to browse the shelves?'

'All ninety kilometres of them.'

Mahalia had marshalled a bunch of trusted students such as Nitra to help, upgrading their passes for access to the stacks and some of the stores. They all carried the basic tools: a swipe for smartplastic boxes, white gloves for handling objects, torches, and a crowbar for cracking open the older wooden cases.

With ten teams of two working eight-hour days, they found the rooms from Sslaqui, Herculanum, Xanadu and two dozen others. The Pavilion designs were agreed, the invites sent and accepted, a series of talks from the Collection's experts added to the whole scheme, and Bev had been talked into opening up the Hall of Mirrors. Over three thousand objects to be displayed had been tracked down and were being prepped by dozens of conservators, mounters and framers in the laboratories and workshops.

The only thing they hadn't found was the Amber Room.

Occasionally, the curving corridors would reveal a working area, where one or two quiet people did mysterious things to delicate curiosities. The subtle lights down here were colour coded to indicate the level of the building they were on, a band of the same colour running along the floor.

Jason spotted the markings the first time he entered the stacks.

'Way out of the labyrinth?' he asked.

'Yep. Better hope there ain't no monsters in its heart.'

Jason looked along the corridor. 'So, ninety kilometres, huh? That's a lot of paintings.'

'Just a few million. Then there's the sculptures, the installation art, the everyday and *objets trouves,* the books, machinery, obsolete technology –'

'I've seen the Martian war machine already.'

'– the tapestries, the costume stores, the –'

'Okay, okay!' Jason surrendered.

'There's stories,' Mahalia offered.

'Like?'

'Like stuff down here you don't want to find. A book in the library vault which is supposedly chained up for the reader's own security. A set of windchimes you shouldn't fall asleep beneath. Joachim over in art swears there is a painting you can only ever glimpse from the corner of your eye. Course, he swears he saw a white rabbit in a waistcoat down here once.'

'You don't believe in the rabbit then?'

'I don't believe in none of it. They're bueno tales to tell round a fire or over a pint but that's all. Take this Amber Room –'

'Gladly, if we ever find it. What should I be keeping an eye out for anyway?'

'Did you sleep through the briefing?'

'Pretty much, yeah. I mean, I knew you'd be teaming me with you or Judy or Nitra or someone else who actually knows what they're doing…'

'Judy'll be down tomorrow.' Mahalia had spotted the way the two of them had fallen quickly into an easy flirtation. Always side by side, giggling like teenagers, or throwing insults with a smile. She knew Jason was in some kind of thing with Professor Summerfield but she doubted Judy was seeing it any more seriously than Jason was.

'We're looking for the sections of the room. A dozen panels, nearly four metres high by a metre across. Thin sheets of amber backed with goldleaf and veneer. Another ten panels a metre square. And there are also skirting boards and decorative details. Some chandeliers. I uploaded the only extant images to the flipscreens. And all of this could be in cases on opposite sides of the planetoid.'

‘No problem.’

Since that first day, the long hours sifting through the storerooms had allowed Mahalia to get a handle on Jason. He was like the guys who crewed Mama’s ship, all easy charm and casual friendships. Work was a means to an end, to be drifted in and out of when the means to drift in and out of bars dried up. Which made him good company.

Today, walking with Judy and Ekantika down to their starting place, he was wondering what was special about the Amber Room.

‘Can’t we just use something else?’

Mahalia shook her head. ‘The Amber Room is one of the most famous lost rooms in the universe. Built by Prussian Emperors and gifted to Peter the Great. He planned to make it into a cabinet of curiosities, the private precursors to museums and ultimately the Collection.

‘Amber was more valuable than gold then. It’s not just a room, it’s a symbol the two nations claimed as their own. Two centuries later and Leningrad is about to be surrounded. The Palace Museum’s curators had to evacuate the valuables but the Room was too fragile to be moved.’

Judy took over from Mahalia. She’d investigated the Room when she studied under Cruixley, the professor who was due to open the lecture series.

‘So they’ve a priceless room, no way of moving it and the Panzer divisions are ten miles off. It can’t fall into fascist hands. What does the curator do? He hides the room. In situ. Papers it over, covers the precious floor with sand and hopes it’ll stay disguised as a normal room as he flees with the rest of the collection to Siberia.

‘Within hours, it’s found, stripped out of the Palace and taken to Germany.

‘The war changes direction, with Russia and America racing across Germany to start the Cold War. The Amber Room is tracked to a castle but it’s vanished. The room it was stored in has been torched. Someone got to it; either destroyed it or spirited it away.’

‘I’m guessing, since we’re trying to find it, that it was the latter,’

Jason said.

‘Yep,’ Mahalia reached a storeroom door, the first of however many they’d search over the day. ‘Not sure how, but the Collection has it.’

‘How are we doing?’ Jason asked, breaking a tired silence.

Mahalia inspected her palm. ‘Last two stores of the day, right ahead. That’s this whole corridor done.’

‘What I wouldn’t give for this bloody room to be in one of these.’

Judy walked ahead of them to take the last store, ‘Careful the Room doesn’t take you up on that.’

Jason groaned. ‘Did I mention the drinks I’ll be buying when we’re done? Keep up the happy talk and I’m de-inviting you. What’s this persistence with the Room as if it were cursed, anyway?’

‘I told you: the history of the Amber Room is a trail of death stretching back to when it was first made. Like the Herr Doktor who was murdered by the Stasi in his wilderness hideaway for daring to search for it?’

Jason rolled his eyes, smiled defeat. Judy grinned as she waved her disk at the store’s infopane. Mahalia’s flipscreen listed nothing but the code. As the door opened, she heard Judy mutter, ‘That’s odd.’

‘What’s up?’

‘My disc didn’t work. Maybe I swiped it wrong?’ Judy tried again.

The store’s infopane remained dim. Ekantika tried her own disc. Still nothing.

‘Maybe it’s a store Braxiatel had marked for tighter security,’ Jason suggested. ‘Judy, you and Ekantika take this one and we’ll try that.’

Mahalia checked her flipscreen. ‘Don’t say it’s off limits here but maybe Brax was being particularly secretive.’

She swiped her disc at the infopane. *Nada*. She waved it again. No information and the door remained resolutely shut.

The corridor lighting blinked. Just for a moment, the after-image of summer lightning. They all glanced at each other, unwilling to ask if it had really happened. When you lived on an artificial world terraformed onto a lifeless planetoid, questions about the power failing were best left unvoiced. Like a locked door, it was the thing that kept them alive.

The infopane burst into life.

‘What the…?’

Where there should have been details of the room there were fractally expanding patterns in harsh clashing colours. Images flickering so fast they hurt.

Mahalia thumped the wall above the panel. The useless info jittered briefly, then continued faster than before.

‘Maybe we should –’ Jason was saying when the corridor lights flickered, long enough for them to be sure this time, then blinked out.

For a moment they were lit only by the harsh colours of the infopane, then the emergency light above the open door glowed into life. It was bluish green, tinted with ultra violet so that normally invisible markings on the corridor were revealed. One by one, in slow alarming sequence, the emergency lights began to glow, each new pool of light a bit further away, UV arrows pointing the way out.

In the hollow light Judy suddenly looked scared, and Mahalia saw the ghosts in her eyes.

‘Judy, why don’t you two start going through the other store?’

Jason raised an eyebrow at Mahalia, as the others headed into the open doorway opposite, but she shook her head.

'Ain't worth bringing the past back now,' she said.

Jason held her gaze for a moment and she thought he looked older suddenly. He waved his pass at the infopane, without success.

'Maybe we should call maintenance?' he suggested.

'To do what? Take three hours to get here, tell us what we already know, then take two weeks to fix it? You're meant to have skills. 'Bout time we saw them, huh?'

'What the hell do you think I can do?'

Mahalia shrugged.

'Fine, fine.' He pulled out a knife from his pocket and started poking about.

The infopane went blank. Now they were left with the dim emergency lights, but Mahalia was still relieved the jagged colours were gone. She stepped back as Jason levered the panel off the wall.

Inside, old-fashioned wires tied themselves into knots. Jason looked over his shoulder at Mahalia as he stripped some of the wires back and grinned.

'Let's just try any of 'em, eh?'

'Jason, no! That's –'

She jumped back as he touched two wires together and sparks crackled.

The door, slowly and grudgingly, opened.

As they stepped through, the automatic lights within failed to rise.

Mahalia didn't miss Jason quickly scouting for something to nudge into the doorway. There were oddments of wood and packing materials next to the small desk. Removed from cases, probably, and then never actually thrown away. Conservators didn't live disposable lives. Jason slid a thick block of wood over till it rested in the door's groove.

The lights still hadn't risen. Mahalia swung her torch about in mostly steady arcs, revealing rows of crates. Some were ancient wooden cases, others modern metal, but a paper printout was pasted onto each, next to obsolete generations of electronic tracking.

Tarrant's quantum-tagging drones weren't due to make it down here for another three months. Her first glance showed plenty of cases worth investigating.

'Judy? Ekantika? We're in! Come and help. And let's be quick, yes?'

Mahalia took the furthest aisle. The first crack of a crowbar shot through the room and Mahalia was annoyed with herself for jumping.

She was in a row of wooden crates, shelved till they towered over her.

They smelt faintly, of time and dust. The air was cool, controlled to

limit damage to the objects. Ahead, Mahalia saw long narrow wheeled racks, like the ones used for paintings, but within were several tall narrow crates.

The wood was pale and rough, ancient black ink bled with age into it. As her torchlight played over the marks, trying to decipher them, she felt a breath on her neck. Glancing behind she saw no one. An air vent, causing a slight breeze. She felt it again as she moved forward to grab the handle that would pull one of the racks out. As her hand touched the metal, a spark flew, numbing her fingers briefly and she thought she heard the ghost of a whisper at her back.

Static shock.

She could hear Judy's voice a week ago, telling them about how amber carried a faint charge. Could be nothing. Besides, it was discharged now. She reached for the handle again and was flung backwards.

Jason was next to her almost immediately, helping her rise.

'Are you all right?'

'Fine. Bit bruised but fine. I want to open *that* crate though.'

'Stay here.' He strode into the darkness, torchlight bouncing randomly across the ceiling. Mahalia stood watching the rack, feeling the fine hairs on her neck rising.

'What's going on?' Judy's voice emerged from the darkness.

Mahalia swung around to see her friend's pale face emerge, eyes black in the faint light.

Jason was coming back, with a long stick of wood from the pile by the door. He thrust one end through the loop of the handle and pushed at the improvised lever.

The metal screamed as it rolled across the floor, reverberating across the store, bouncing back at them. Revealed, the front of the case showed scorch marks and a smudge which might once have been a swastika. Before Jason or Mahalia could stop her, Judy had darted forward and put her crowbar against the case.

'No!' Mahalia called. The crack of the crowbar sounded like snapping bones, but the front of the case was off. Judy stepped back and raised her torch. Its light caught at the goldleaf backing and reflected through the thin amber sheets, making her face glow like molten gold.

'We've found it,' Judy whispered.

Mahalia leaves Jason behind, walking down to the exhibition Pavilions with Rubric. She always seemed to get stuck with the serious old guys and now finds herself talking too much to compensate for his gravitas. This is supposed to be a celebration after all. She's even dug out her evening gown and a silk shawl to dolly up. Bev has whisked

Minister Makusa off and Judy is chatting with Cruixley. Rubric keeps nodding and asking serious questions too tricky for Mahalia to answer without a mini-lecture.

They walk through the Garden of Harrowmad first, the living green walls and tapestry of climbing flowers echoing and contrasting with the open gardens outside the Pavilion; the gardens' lines still visible, even if the snow is masking the colours. Inside, the green light comes from gently glowing berries of the missentangle woven into the arching canopy of trees.

'The Garden lives?'

'Yes. We keep it in cryostorage, perfectly preserved, ready to be reconstructed.'

'But the room you return to cryostorage will not be the one you took out. The plants will grow and change whilst they are awake.'

'That's true. There's an argument that objects should be allowed to age, to change. That it's through use that objects acquire meaning and the purpose of a collection is to offer meanings.'

'By that argument, the whole Collection should be allowed to decay.'

'No! I mean, ultimately perhaps. But keeping hold of the past is important, so we have to favour preservation regardless of personal opinion.'

They pause in the doorway of the Sslaqui room. It's not possible to go in: all the breathers are in use by guests floating through the liquid blue space, treading against the solution in order to admire the corals and drifting artworks.

In the ZaniC room, where the sonic walls are constructed from carefully harmonised vibrations within the crystals, Mahalia manages to introduce Rubric to a visiting professor and slips away.

Finally, she has an exhibition!

She walked the rooms earlier, before the guests arrived, and savoured the layout, the choice of exhibits, the discreet infopanes.

Everything she had ever wanted, but for one thing. And now they are here as well. Real visitors, wandering the rooms and looking at exhibits, creating stories and ideas out of the material around them.

The exhibition lives.

One set of doors into the Amber Room is open. Despite having seen the room as it was reconstructed, Mahalia still lets out a tiny gasp.

The gilt chandeliers are lit, the yellow candle flames refracting in the oiled amber and reflected by the gold behind till the walls seem to float. As if they contain hundreds of tiny glowing suns making the air itself shimmer. Every single surface is covered with a thin layer of amber, the patterns in the veins of the mineral lit up by the reflected glow.

The only things spoiling the effect are the low podium for the speaker and the vodka table. Despite Mahalia's best efforts, Bev insisted on something Russian to give the guests as they listened to Cruixley's talk. A couple of servers are pouring out measures, doing their best to ignore Jason's lurking figure. Spotting Mahalia, he raises his glass.

'Found the booze,' he mouths. She grins.

She's in her favourite part of the room, next to a panel where, if you know just where to look, there is a tiny insect. A dark speck in the glowing mineral. She's looking for it, because she likes the hunt, but in the candlelight it eludes her. Rubric reappears at her elbow. His head is at an angle she thinks is meant to indicate polite interest but manages to come over as superiority. He holds a glass of vodka as if it were alien.

'Hello? Yes, well, good evening all. I'm Professor Cruixley, and I'll be doing a little talk about the Amber Room and how simply astonishing it is to be standing in it. I'll keep it short, since I see we have… oh, look, could we close those doors? Get the full effect? Thanks. So, as I was saying –'

'Conservator Mahalia, I have a question,' Rubric says. Mahalia would have expected him to be paying attention to the speech but then she spots Verso across the room, next to Parasiel.

'Of course, Rubric.'

'Are the insects also part of the exhibition?'

'Oh yes, since they are part of the walls.'

He shakes his head, on an old man usually the sign of irritation.

Here, just a neutral gesture. 'I mean the insects in the air of the room.'

Mahalia realises that he is right. The faint buzz she had assumed was the background noise of visitors whispering was tiny insects. She looks about, wondering where they had come from.

A line of Cossacks stands against the far doors. They're wearing heavy coats and boots, snow melting in the fur trims. Glancing towards the other doors, Mahalia has to bite her inner lip not to cry out. There are Nazi stormtroopers, wrapped in charcoal trench-coats with rifles slung on their shoulders. All the soldiers' eyes are blank.

Not unfocused. Blank amber orbs.

'This is not your work,' says Rubric.

Other guests are noticing, smiling or frowning depending on what they think. Mahalia doesn't know who they are. Bev wouldn't have arranged this: it's too strange. And they aren't holograms because there are no projectors in the room. Cruixley falters a little, stumbles as he feels the blank stares, and then a woman screams and the frozen figures come to life.

‘They’re not real,’ Mahalia hears Bev say as people start moving, heading for the only free set of doors. The soldiers are advancing towards each other, trapping the guests.

Mahalia sees Judy suddenly. She’s standing in the centre of the room, and a bayonet is emerging from her shoulder. As the soldier wrenches the blade free, there is a spurt of blood, dark in the amber light, and Judy isn’t screaming. She’s falling and Mahalia is moving to grab her.

She can feel Judy’s trembling, low shakes of shock. The soldier is standing above them and though Mahalia can hear screams and scuffling chaos, her life is suddenly this tiny space. As the blade descends, she tries to pull Judy aside, sobbing as she hears the other woman scream in pain. The blade hits, ripping towards Judy’s lungs and Mahalia realises she can do nothing to stop it descending again.

She tries to cover Judy with her own body but she’s shaking so much that her muscles won’t obey.

The soldier is falling away, shoved to one side and Jason stands there. As he looks down to check on them, Mahalia sees the ghosts in his eyes. But he’s awake in a way she’d never seen before, scanning the room.

‘They’re not interested in us, we’re just in the way,’ he says.

‘They’re not real,’ someone else is saying and Mahalia looks at the blood bubbling through her hands.

‘They’re real enough.’

Jason kneels, scoops Judy up in his arms.

‘Go towards the doors,’ he’s calling, shouldering through the milling guests and slashing blades. Mahalia scrambles after, clutching at her flimsy evening shawl like it will shield her against sharpened steel.

The doors are locked. The people who reached them first are crushed against the amber surface, hands scrabbling. Cruixley is there, looking panicked. Jason edges towards the podium and Nitra is putting her jacket down to cushion Judy as he sets her down.

In the centre of the room, some of the guests are lying where they have fallen, too slow or shocked to have got out of the way. Too disbelieving. Mahalia can’t tell if they are all right or not. In the amber light, blood is black like spilt wine. Bev is bellowing for calm.

Jason and some of the guests are making a concerted effort on the doors now.

‘They’re only wood,’ Mahalia says, but some other force is holding the doors closed, sealing them in with the soldiers. Jason is crouching next to them again.

‘There’s no shifting them.’

Bev kneels to check on Judy. ‘We need to get medical help straight away. There are at least a dozen wounded.’ She lowers her voice,

scowling towards Minister Makusa. ‘One from cutting himself on his vodka glass.’

Jason grins. ‘Back in a minute.’

He’s squirming his way through the guests. ‘Mahalia!’ he calls back to her. ‘Get cotton, fabric. Makes strips of it.’

‘What?’

He’s already away, talking to one of the servers. She can see their shoulders bobbing and they’re off and running, keeping low and crashing into the bar. Their movement draws the attention of the soldiers, the first time Mahalia’s sensed they are reacting to the guests instead of just running them through. Jason and the server are grabbing armfuls of bottles and looking for a way back across the room. Mahalia can’t bear to watch. Instead she starts ripping at her silk shawl, making rough strips. She hears a scream and looks over.

Jason throws aside some bottles and uses his free arm to pull the server back towards the remaining group of guests. Her torso is slashed and one arm is dragging against the floor.

And the soldiers have turned now, facing the guests. In unison, the Russians come to attention with their short sabres vertical. The German stormtroopers slam their heels together and fix bayonets.

It’s the silence Mahalia hates.

They are going to advance, turning against some common enemy in their fight for the possession of the room.

That’s what they want. They want the room. They are the room. As much as the amber panels and the goldleaf. She’d wanted history to live, and here it was.

Jason has pushed through to her, is opening one bottle whilst he keeps the others wedged in the crook of his elbow. He takes a glug with a deliberate relish then turns the bottle over, letting the spirit splash to the floor till it is half gone. He grabs a strip of material out of Mahalia’s hands. Starts wrapping it about the half-full bottle.

‘Amber has to be heated gently,’ he says to her, ‘as if it goes above two hundred Celsius…’

‘It self-ignites!’

Jason grins again. ‘And you thought I was sleeping during that briefing. OK, everyone! Clear some space.’

Even as people try to move, Mahalia sees the soldiers advancing, blades down and ready. A few dozen paces and they will be amongst the group. Other guests have realised Jason’s plan, are grabbing the remaining bottles, building their own weapons. Mahalia realises the other thing they’ll need and shoves her way over to the wall.

‘Light… light… light…’ Jason murmurs, patting pockets. Mahalia passes him a still burning candle, dripping wax splashing fat droplets on her hands.

As the silk bursts into flame, Jason draws his arm back and hurls the Molotov cocktail at the doors.

'The doors!' he's yelling, as a couple of bottles are thrown against the soldiers, failing to smash against the soft targets. One, its rag still lit, is crushed beneath a boot, causing the flames to roar up and catch in the soldier's coat. But he continues to advance.

It's working against the doors, though, the amber catching in an uprush of air, the oil and resin on its surface spreading the burning liquor, igniting the mineral. Jason has hold of part of the podium and Mahalia joins him, grabbing hold and shielding her face from the heat as best she can with her shoulder. She can hear screaming behind her.

They have to break these doors.

There's a creaking sound, a cracking like bones, and she's being showered with burning amber, the melting fragments searing on to her exposed skin. Another smash, more burning debris. But a rush of air throws a roar of sparks into the air, black smoke roiling across the ceiling. They drop the remains of the podium, shove it hard along the floor and the doors fly wide.

Professor Cruixley and Ekentika are bringing Judy. Others are being pulled free from the burning room, coughing and retching, eyes streaming. Jason is watching, bent double and breathing heavily.

'That's everyone,' he says.

'We need to stop that fire…'

'Mahalia…' Bev is holding her gaze, steady and cold like crystal.

'We have to save the room. It's priceless!'

Bev looks away, pointedly towards where Judy is lying, hands pressed against her chest. Beyond, through the flames, Mahalia can see the soldiers smearing into dark shadows.

'Let it burn,' Bev says.

Anightintheninthage

Lance Parkin

Tarrant tapped at the control, and the surveillance video of the Quire faded.

Bernice Summerfield's first thought, she admitted to herself, was to wonder whether Tarrant had ever taped her without permission. Her second, third, fourth and so on were preoccupied by what she'd been shown. She brought to bear her long experience observing and assessing alien cultures; her expertise in anthropology, art history, cultural studies, and archaeology (of course); what she'd learned of civilisations living and dead gleaned by travelling further than anyone else alive in the twenty-seventh century.

'It's like watching Teletubbies,' Benny announced, after a short pause.

Bev Tarrant frowned.

'Trust me on that,' Benny added quickly.

'Are we watching social interaction so complex that we can't interpret it?' Bev asked.

'Or a –' Benny fished for *le mot juste* '– bunch of tossers?'

A number of theories were forming, Benny found. She'd never done much formal study of psychology, but she had Peter and had watched him develop as he played, faintly remembering that she'd done the same when she was tiny. Human grown-ups weren't meant to play, at least not like that. Sports games, yes, but that was simple primate dominance posturing.

(Said the part of her brain still annoyed to be the last even vaguely healthy kid anyone ever picked at school. But it had a point.) When human adults talked about 'playing', they never meant the freeform activity that small children spent all their time at, a sort of unselfconscious expression of imagination. For adults, it was always tests of strength or skill, designed – ultimately – to establish your place in the hierarchy. Work hard, play hard.

Life's just a game we play.

'What are their rules?' Benny asked. All games had rules. Not just the sports, but drinking, dressing up, a night at the theatre or restaurant, activities in dataspace, even sex.

Bev had been reading some notes. 'Sorry?'

'They have rules. There was that bit where, er, the bald one told the shaggy one off for playing. Then later, Incunabula had her food taken away for doing something wrong.'

‘Wearing the wrong eye.’

‘At the dinner table.’

‘Weird.’

‘It was one of the few things that made any sense, I thought. One of the kids did something she knew was wrong, one of the adults told her off. We’d consider it cruel to not feed a child like that, but –’

‘I mean weird that they can pop their eyes out.’

‘Yes.’ Even in a cosmopolitan galaxy, with a host of different alien races and various technologies that allowed for body-modification, that was pushing it.

‘I want you to do something for me, Benny.’

Benny raised an eyebrow.

‘I want you to talk to Verso.’

Benny floundered a little, until Bev reactivated the display. ‘That one,’ she pointed.

The young woman. Assuming that appearances weren’t deceptive, which, despite millennia of evidence to the contrary, human beings tended to assume.

‘They’re pretty much indistinguishable outside of the apartment, but inside it…’ She gestured at the holo.

‘She’s the friendliest,’ Benny surmised.

‘She also talks about as much as all the others put together. That and… well, she’s naive. Takes things at face value, doesn’t seem to spot subtexts or hidden agendas.’

Far, far in the future, Benny thought, there was a Utopian society made up of such selfless individuals. In the here and now, a universal constant amongst sentient life – a definition, practically a precondition – was that people had to understand that what they saw and were told wasn’t always the whole truth.

An alarm bell went off in Benny’s head.

‘Are they putting on an act?’ she asked.

‘Well, that’s one of the questions to answer.’

‘You want me to spy on her.’

‘Not at all. Spying I can do, I want you to talk to her.’

‘I won’t do it. Whatever I’ve done for you in the past, I’ve more than made up –’

‘I’ll make it worth your while.’

Benny paused, her eyes narrowing as Bev held up a flipscreen.

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s a request. You’ve heard of Columbanus?’

‘Sure. University tucked away inside a starship the size of a small moon. Stone cladding on a carbominium alloy frame, very stylish I’m told.’

‘Academics in a bottle,’ Bev nodded. ‘They’ve been on the border of

Mim and Draconian space for a few months. Funnily enough, they're looking for a quick way out.'

'That's impending interplanetary war for you.'

'And they want to make a fly-by here in about ten days' time. Okay, so you'd miss Valentine's Day, but…' Bev tapped the flipscreen.

'Have a chat with Verso, and there's a seven-day invite to Columbanus with your name on it.'

Benny said nothing, kept her posture resolutely unchanged, but Tarrant smiled anyway.

Hook, line, sinker.

Bernice sighed, 'You really think I'm the best person for this?'

'Benny, you're undoubtedly the best person for this job.'

Although she didn't need Bev Tarrant's praise to feel good about herself, Benny wasn't going to get grumpy about a little recognition from a colleague.

The warm glow lasted a full two seconds as Tarrant added, 'All we need is someone who can get drunk and indiscreet with some teenage student. It's practically your job description.'

It wasn't difficult to get Verso back to Benny's study.

Benny had realised this, and hadn't bothered drawing up an elaborate strategy. Verso didn't understand the notion of an ulterior motive, so simply asking her round for a chat did the trick. She turned up exactly at eight. The second the clock flicked over, in fact.

'Hello, Bernice,' she said.

'Call me Benny.'

'Why?'

'Um… it's short for Bernice.'

'A short form would be… shorter. Those words both have two syllables.'

'Yes… but… I prefer my friends to call me Benny.'

Verso gave a small nod of her head. Benny wondered when humans had started doing that to indicate approval or understanding. Way back in the past, perhaps before humans had evolved into modern humans. It was a universal symbol – or near enough. She remembered reading once that they didn't nod in Bulgaria, a fact that had stayed with her when things like computer passwords and friends' birthdays eluded her.

A gesture that had survived long into the future, then, longer, by at least some definitions, than the human race itself.

Verso stepped into the room, looking around, a little confused.

'We are alone?'

'Just us girls.'

Benny felt a tug in her throat, hoping that Verso was female. That

was how Benny had thought of… her. Verso had narrower shoulders and wider hips than the members of the Quire Benny had tagged as male.

Verso didn't seem offended.

'You are female?' Benny pressed.

'Some of us are, yes.'

'Please sit down.'

Verso half flopped, half flowed onto the sofa, spending the next couple of moments settling herself. She'd caught the hem of her toga, adjusted it to release her leg.

Benny removed a couple of books from a shelf, withdrew a vodka bottle and glasses from behind them. Then, avoiding the comfy armchair where she sat for tutorials, collapsed alongside Verso, smiling.

There was a splash of silver across Verso's scalp, but for the most part, just an even covering of the same fine hairs as the rest of her body.

An artificial environment, Benny decided. The Quire had evolved to suit somewhere where the climate was controlled. The fine hairs would offer some insulation, but wouldn't interfere with, say, the seals of a face mask. Their small bodies would need less room and a little less food, water and air. Powerful limbs, so not a zero-gravity environment. And pale reddish-brown skin, so they'd be able to cope easily with exposure to sunlight. Benny found herself picturing great transparent domes, set in beautiful parkland. But sparsely populated, she thought; any city-sized community would have instilled a harder edge in them.

Benny poured them both a generous splash of vodka and handed Verso a glass. She took it, sniffed, seemed to stare at it for a while, like she was running a spectrographic analysis – hadn't one of them said something about microscopic vision? – then, finally, sipped. She took a little time to register the taste, but seemed to like it.

Assuming, of course, that the Quire spoke anything like the same dialect of body language.

Verso was beautiful, with sharp cheekbones, big eyes… big, weird eyes. Yes, Benny knew she'd need to find out about those eyes. Verso had a small mouth and, when she spoke or smiled, Benny could see her teeth, but not well enough to study them.

Teeth were one of the best ways of tracking the gradations of evolutionary change. Every animal had to eat, but as the environment changed or species migrated to new habitats, what they ate could change almost overnight. What you bit and chewed your food with had to change, too, and changed far faster than complicated, balanced structures like internal organs… although even teeth never evolved

overnight. Humans, good omnivores that they were, had a set of teeth that could take on most challenges, unlike species that only ate meat or nuts. Humans of this epoch, Benny corrected herself. If her theory was right, Verso would have smaller, more specialised, teeth. A controlled food supply for a controlled environment.

'You are very pretty,' Verso told her, blinking.

Benny was a little taken-aback; there was a line that rarely came without an ulterior motive. Verso had been studying Benny all the time she'd been studying Verso.

Verso reached out, unfurled fingers that had at least two more joints than Benny's, and stroked Benny's hair. It was an intimate move, normally at least, and Benny might usually have flinched.

Instead, she let Verso's fingers weave through strands of hair, fingertips brushing Benny's scalp, a surprisingly sensuous process.

Verso didn't have fingernails.

Benny looked over at her guest, suddenly all too conscious that she had no idea what this hair-stroking *meant*. There was a range of possibility from non-consensual telepathic contact to the beginning of foreplay.

It was very nice, though.

Verso's eye extruded from its socket, swivelled down as it extended out and around the side of Benny's head.

'Waaaargh!' Benny said, lurching back, almost spilling her drink.

Verso also recoiled, her eye whipping around a little.

'I'm… sorry,' said Benny.

'I just wanted a whole view of you,' Verso said, clearly a little puzzled.

Benny understood. Verso would have been able to see her, front and back. It was surprisingly difficult to conceptualise what she'd see, though.

'Sorry… you surprised me. Go ahead.'

'No. I will scare you.'

'I was just surprised… I can't do that with my eye, I didn't realise you could.'

Verso cocked her head. Then she reached into her eye socket with a couple of those long, multi-jointed fingers and plucked out her own eyeball. That done, she handed it to Benny.

Benny looked down at it, looking up at her. An eye, a thin, flexible – surprisingly dry – tube of flesh snaking down from it.

'Attach it,' Verso suggested, grinning. Benny stared straight down the empty eye socket.

'I… we can't do that.'

'Your fingers are a bit… clumsy. If you like, I can do it for you.'

Verso reached out with her hand.

‘No!’ Benny said, quickly.

‘I wasn’t going to remove your eye,’ Verso clarified.

‘Good,’ Benny told her.

Verso’s hand fell off.

Benny decided to swig some of her vodka, rather than trying to catch the hand.

‘You can do that, too, then,’ she said, in the absence of anything more insightful to add. Scratch any theories about teeth; it’d be new dentures for every meal. Like having a big cutlery set, Benny thought – a steak knife, a fish fork, a… whatever else there was in a cutlery set.

Verso blinked. Or winked, at any rate.

‘You should…’ Benny tried to hand the eye back, before she remembered Verso hadn’t got a free hand to take it with.

‘Your hair is very pretty,’ Verso said, setting down her glass, snapping her hand back on, then using it to reattach her eye.

‘You wear different eyes, depending on what you need to see?’

‘Yes. Telescopic, microscopic, eschatoscopic, wide spectrum, picothermic, abaryonic, tessaractic and so on.’

‘They’re specialised. Are they… manufactured?’ A rather horrible thought had struck Benny. ‘Are you born with, er, well two normal ones? They have to remove one?’

Verso laughed. ‘You called them “special eyes”. That’s a nice name.’

‘I…’ Benny realised that Verso was a little drunk. She topped up her guest’s glass for her.

‘Do you have any questions about us?’ Benny prompted.

There was that old adage that the most telling questions about a society were the ones it didn’t ever ask. From the twentieth century on Earth, for example, a lot of people had been sceptical about faith in gods, asking all sorts of awkward questions that weren’t fully settled until the twenty-third. But few people asked big questions about money, by any standard a crazier and more all-pervasive belief system.

‘Do you have money?’ Benny asked, taking her unconscious mind up on its suggestion.

Verso nodded. ‘Plenty, thank you. I don’t have any questions.’ She slurped at her vodka, then gave a surprisingly coarse-sounding chuckle.

‘You don’t want to ask anything about us?’

‘Nah – we’ll find out what we need to know. We know a lot already. Like the Garden of Eden and Neil Armstrong and apartheid and the Galactic War and Space Arks and writing and stuff.’

‘This must seem like the dawn of history to you?’

‘Oh I like being in the Ninth Age.’

‘Ninth? Er… how are you measuring that?’

‘It was before the Three Secrets were lost forever. After the great rifts opened, of course. When time was at quantum five.’

Benny altered her angle of attack.

‘Do you live somewhere like the Collection? Or on a planet?’

‘A bit of both.’

‘You move around?’

‘Yes.’

‘What do you… what do you want?’

‘Oh, you’ve not had the Cornucopian Revolution, have you? That’s quite soon, though.’ She smiled, revealing a set of teeth that seemed designed for smiling rather than eating. The good silver today, then.

Benny smiled back. ‘I know what a cornucopian society is. Highly advanced civilisations… really, really advanced civilisations, have machines that can restructure matter. They just dial up all the food and resources they need. All physical need is instantly and perfectly satisfied.’

‘Yes. We’re about four steps beyond all that.’

‘I can’t begin to imagine what that means.’

‘No. You’re still living in the Age of Endarkenment. You’re a bit stupid, really. You don’t see things like we do.’

‘Well, I only have the one set of eyes.’

‘You have many sets of eyes, you just don’t see through all of them.’

Benny sipped at her vodka, realising she’d had enough of it to make that last bollocks utterance seem deeply profound. Half the bottle had gone, but she couldn’t recall topping up their glasses once.

‘You can say that again,’ she agreed.

‘You’re a bit stupid, really, aren’t you?’

Benny got the sense that Verso was loosening up a little, too.

‘Well, I’d hope that humanity would have developed by your time. We must seem like monkeys to you.’

‘Monkeys are funny. I ate one, once. They don’t taste as nice you’d think. But you’re not like a monkey to me. You don’t really understand the scale of things, do you? Even a billion years ago from this time, there weren’t monkeys. There were only bacteria. There are still bacteria in this time, of course. Not all the old genes go away just because new things come along.’

‘And in yours?’

‘Oh, yes. Other things have come along.’

‘Are… people… the dominant form of life?’

‘Are they now?’

‘Yes.’ It seemed like a fair answer. It was, Benny thought, an honest response.

‘Better things come along.’

‘Computer intelligence?’ One of the great fears of humankind for five hundred years had been the apparently imminent moment when artificial minds could outdo human ones. Like so many other ways in which civilisation was going to collapse or save itself, the Singularity appeared to be as far away as ever.

‘Oh, we don’t need computers.’

‘Do you have them?’

‘They don’t really need us, either. Or we do, but we don’t need to have conversations. A bit like humans and bacteria, really. Only smart.’

‘Um… I don’t mean to offend you, but the Quire often seem unfriendly to us.’

‘Unfriendly?’

‘Well… rude. Anti-social.’

Verso laughed for several minutes. It didn’t just seem like it: Benny actually had time to get up, shift the books around for another bottle of vodka, come back, pour herself a glass and nearly drain it. The laughter was musical… not in the sense that there was any tune, but it ranged up and down a scale of notes, and almost had a chorus, a great repeated guffaw.

Verso looked Benny blearily in the eye. The telescopic eyeball did its very best to stay level, but was almost at right angles to the other.

‘The Collection is a good friend to the Quire.’

Verso slumped into her seat, started snoring.

Benny sat staring at the small figure for a moment. Verso’s eyes were still open, but glassy. Her mouth was clamped shut.

After a minute or so, Benny activated the intercom.

‘You learn anything?’ Bev Tarrant asked.

‘Well… turns out they can sleep. And she says we’re all their bezzy mate. And they can’t hold their alcohol.’

‘That’s it?’

Benny looked down at the sleeping Quire. She’d had a lot of vodka, but didn’t think it had washed away anything important. Benny had memorised all that Ninth Age stuff, in case it came in useful. She might be able to cross reference it with data held somewhere in the Collection.

‘That’s it for the moment.’

She closed the link. There were footsteps in the corridor outside; some poor lone student on his way home from a late study session.

Which was useful, because she’d need help getting Verso back to the Quire.

Benny opened the door, lurched out into the corridor, and smiled.

‘Parasiel.’

Grey's Anatomy

Simon A. Forward

'To questions asked' was a principle Mordecan would have dearly loved to introduce to the Collection.

Academics were a rum lot, and that was one concept they would have trouble getting their knowledge-swollen heads around.

For a breed supposedly in possession of more answers than anyone else, they always had more questions.

To be fair, the receptionist currently giving him a hard time was more bureaucrat than academic, but her prissy hairdo and youthful complexion persuaded Mordecan that he was dealing with a specimen of humanity not yet past the pupil stage.

'At the risk of repeating myself ad infinitum,' he argued, turning up the default Irish brogue he had adopted for this job and throwing in some Latin for the scholarly touch, 'Mr Grey doesn't need a visitor's pass. He's not visiting. He's a VIP – Very Important Passenger – and he wishes to remain on board for the duration. I'm here as his representative, and we've established my personal invitation checks out fine.'

It had better. He'd written to Benny expressing a desire to drop by and she had kindly furnished him with the little plastic ident disc he was currently flipping like a coin. Privately, Mordecan objected to this exclusivity, the idea that people – legitimate business folk – were only welcome here by invitation. Especially when those people had something special, nay unique, to offer.

And uniqueness was surprisingly difficult to come by in a universe of infinite diversity.

Academics. When their noses weren't in books, they were up in the air.

At least Benny was down to earth. She had warned him she was scheduled to be away a great deal, and hence unable to grant his matter her personal attention. Mordecan had accepted that, took his chance and hoped he'd timed his trip right.

He was confident, and had been reassuring his Very Important Passenger on that score only minutes before running into this jumped-up little bureaubrat.

Still, he had dealt with worse and it wasn't as if the girl had the intimidating height or breadth of a Galyari Security Commander.

Photoreflective skin or no, he had never seen a Galyari's cheeks flush that same shade of hot pink.

‘Sir, with respect, your invitation does not extend to any additional guests and you failed to declare your passenger prior to being granted dispensation to land.’

‘And no one warned me about that over-sized stone-clad juggernaut I just missed coming back down to sublight, but am I complaining?’ Mordecan sighed and spared a glance at the picture window at the end of the hall. It was a mistake to taunt visitors with such an impressive panorama if they were to be subjected to such excessive delays. ‘What’s it matter, who or what I’ve got on board as long as it stays there and is not toxic, flammable, explosive, corrosive or otherwise liable to do you an injury? None of which applies to my passenger, but might apply to yours truly if I have to spend much more time –’

‘Excuse me – Mr Mordecan?’

‘Eh?’ Mordecan glanced a few degrees left, finding a blonde lady in a business suit who had attached herself to one end of the reception desk, proffering a hand. Pleasantly surprised and happy to have his temper-train derailed, he completed the handshake. ‘In person,’ he said.

‘Bev Tarrant,’ she introduced herself. ‘Acting director of this facility.’

She patted the desk and issued the receptionist with a breezy smile.

‘Thank you, I think we can respect the privacy of Mr Mordecan’s passenger, as long as he remains a passenger.’

Just like that, the red tape was cut and Mordecan was free. He liked her already.

* * *

‘Professor Summerfield is away on business, but she told me to expect your visit… and mentioned you might have something of interest for us.’

They’d commandeered one of the robo-rickshaws, and Mordecan was settling back to enjoy the ride. He was getting the full Cinderella treatment and intended to take advantage, right up until the clock struck midnight. On top of her kind offer of accommodation in one of the guest cottages, Ms Tarrant had insisted on escorting him back to the hamlet. Her polite hospitality might have been a front for keeping an eye on him, but they could have been a courting couple out for a drive through the park. Although he doubted they would get as far as holding hands: she looked the sort of lady more than capable of self-chaperoning.

Anyway, their mode of transportation had an antiquated charm that was immediately relaxing and, coincidentally, told Mordecan much of what he needed to know about the Collection.

‘It’s an impressive forgery,’ he remarked, allowing his gaze another sweep of the palatial grounds. It was difficult not to be taken in by the grandiose sprawl of gravel driveways, terraced gardens, ornamental fountains and lawns of individually manicured grass. Not to mention the great Mansionhouse and the lake in which much of the place could admire its own reflection.

‘I beg your pardon?’

That had her attention. ‘All this. All recent in the scheme of things, but I imagine it gives a fair impression of age. To the untrained eye.’

‘I suppose,’ said Ms Tarrant, her tone suggesting that she supposed something else entirely. ‘Some of the buildings are accurate reproductions, using authentic materials. But wherever possible, we’ve incorporated the genuine items. For, example the Collection holds in storage a number of –’

‘Oh, yes,’ Mordecan chuckled. ‘I heard about your exhibition of lost rooms.’

Tarrant bristled, and Mordecan knew he’d found the limit to how far he could push.

‘Most of the real history,’ she continued, ‘is in the artefacts the Collection houses. But the surroundings have to be in keeping with that – a setting worthy of its reputation.’

‘Well, the opulence helps, diverts the eye. It’s the difference between a diamond and a good paste job.’ He patted the seat, his fingers attesting to the quality of the leather. He cleared his throat, quoted:

I could not print
Ground where the grass has yielded to the steps
Of generations of illustrious men,
Unmoved. I could not always lightly pass
Through the same gateways, sleep where they had slept,
Wake where they waked, range that inclosure old,
That garden of great intellects, undisturbed.

His hostess regarded him with a gratifying measure of surprise.

‘Wordsworth. My poetry’s rusty, but that’s the sort of the effect you’re aiming for here, I expect. But it’s no easy thing, building history in. You can coax ivy up walls, weather stone, but you can’t fake that lived-in sense of the past. You’ve done a grand job – that Mansionhouse looks the business. An expert will always tell the difference, but – for what it’s worth – what you have here is an exceptional paste job.’

‘Thank you. I think.’

Mordecan smiled, shifted hastily. ‘See, what I’m getting at – in my

clumsy way – is that this item, well, the moment I clapped eyes on it I knew it was special.' He stroked the seat leather some more, encouraging her to imagine. 'When I opened it and felt those pages – well, instinct rarely deceives, and I'd rather this artefact wasn't seen by just anyone. It deserves expertise appropriate to the item itself. I hope you understand.'

The woman drummed her fingers on the side of the carriage and glanced away. Her eyes were back on him in a moment. 'Mr Mordecan, the Braxiatel Collection would be delighted to examine the item for you. My own experience chiefly lies outside the field of academia, but I can count on any number of trusted colleagues.'

'I meant no insult.' Mordecan held his hands up in apology. 'I'm only disappointed Professor Summerfield couldn't take a look. Benny and me, we go way back.'

'I appreciate that. But, rest assured, I can promise both an informed opinion and a fair valuation. And if the item is as valuable as your instincts tell you, the Collection will be glad to make you an offer –'

'Oh, you misunderstand me, Ms Tarrant. The item is not for sale.'

'It's not?' The lady blinked.

'No, we're looking to have it analysed and authenticated, that sort of thing. It's a puzzle and no mistake. Even if it can't be solved, we'd like to have some understanding of its meaning and purpose. That's all.'

'I see.' She looked him up and down. 'And do you have it with you?'

'It's in Mr Grey's safekeeping for now. But I do have these repros for you to peruse at your leisure. So long as you can keep it to a relatively small circle of friends.'

Mordecan dug inside his jacket and handed her a folder of glossies.

She cast a mildly curious eye over them, but soon succumbed to leafing through with growing interest. It may have been the sunlight bouncing off the lake, but Mordecan was sure he saw her eyes shine.

Bev knew exactly who to consult.

Among the older and crustier relics in the Collection, one insular brotherhood of professors – almost all retired from actual teaching now – had installed themselves in the Lenticular Library, assuming the minimalist title of 'The Society'. Fancying themselves as a kind of Diogenes Club, they debated intellectual ideas, ruminated in silence, or just generally sat around like living repositories of knowledge gathering dust. As though encyclopaedic volumes had descended from the shelves to occupy the most comfortable armchairs.

Bev couldn't swear to knowing all their names, but they were a broad spectrum of thinkers, ranging from the scarily imposing Cruixley (spectacles like a pair of fish bowls) to the 'youngster',

Lennister (russet beard flecked white and rapidly losing its status as the perfect complement to his apple-green jacket). Of their number, Felix Ptarmegan-Pfitch – whom the others ribbed mercilessly for both his silent Ps – was the closest Mycroft to Bev's Sherlock Holmes, but only in the sense that he was smarter but decidedly more sedentary.

It had only been Mahalia's assistant who had coaxed Cruixley out of the library for the Cabinets of Curiosities exhibition. And after that, Bev couldn't see him leaving ever again.

On this occasion, she walked in to catch Felix in rare standing mode, expounding from the tall arched window as though hoping to cast himself and his arguments in a sufficiently halo-like light.

Painfully familiar with the speed at which the Society functioned, Bev wasted no time in dishing out the papers and attracting their attention with an instant. 'I have something I want you to take a look at.' Too late: she spotted Colophon in a corner.

The Quire's russet bulk stepped out to peruse what was on offer; an orang-utan from the top of his evolutionary ladder, resigned to viewing everything from a great height. Bev had forgotten that he had taken to frequenting the Society's meetings, offering up esoteric insights like challenges. Just like the rest of his bloody 'clan'.

'Colophon,' she intercepted him curtly, 'if you don't mind, this is something for my friends.' As an after-thought she added, 'And I think Jason is looking for you.'

Colphon's lopsided gaze lingered over the documents being handed around. 'This is the –'

'Jason,' Bev said.

Colophon paused, took one more look, and then departed with a nod to selected members. When he was gone, Bev switched her focus back to the Society.

She watched their initially cursory inspections. Expressions braced for dismissiveness had become intrigued. Two of them even went so far as to sit up in their chairs.

Felix sauntered over and rudely snatched one of the repros out of Lennister's hand. One hand cupped his chin, squeezing his lips into a pensive pout. 'Well, well, well.'

'Yes,' snapped Bev. 'I've done all that. What I want to know is – is it worth pursuing?'

'This is something you're considering acquiring for the Collection?' asked Cruixley. 'Is it haunted?'

'They're saying it's not for sale.' She shook her head. 'But I'm not sure I buy that. Everyone has their price. I just need to know what this is worth.'

Cruixley's eyes bulged in his lenses and he wagged a finger. 'Two words of caution,' he said. 'Voynich Manuscript.'

‘Yes, I suppose there are passing similarities,’ conceded Felix airily.

‘But I don’t know that you need be quite so cautionary. A thousand years since its first recorded appearance in Prague, the manuscript itself possibly older than that, and the jury’s still out on its legitimacy.’

Oh, please, no, Bev thought.

‘Poppycock,’ argued Cruixley. ‘Any idiot with a Cardan grille could have produced it. The Voynich was the work of some prankster who thought he could pass himself off as a mystic if he carried around a book of sufficient mystery.’

‘Fake or otherwise, the Voynich MS has intrinsic value as a curio.’

Not today.

‘More to the point, my dear Lennister, Cruixley conveniently forgets that, when it comes to the Voynich debate, Zipf’s Law rather rains on the parade of the polyalphabetic cipher brigade.’

‘Can we forget about bloody Voynich and concentrate on the matter in hand?’ Bev snapped, library or not.

‘Well, regardless of what Lemuel Gullible here says,’ answered Cruixley, with a particularly wide stare, ‘ever since we cloned the first sheep it’s been a lot easier to pull the wool over anyone’s eyes. By and large, forgers have advanced in step with our ability to authenticate a given work.’

‘Okay, let me put it this way,’ Bev ventured. ‘If it’s not a hoax, what do we think it is?’

Unfortunately, that opened the floodgates, with every Society member attempting to drown each other out. It was Felix who raised his hands to quieten his colleagues, then wandered over to lay a fraternal arm around Bev’s shoulder. ‘If you’d care to leave the repros with us, we’ll furnish you with our collective opinion, of course, but really you do know they’re of limited use without the context.’

Bev nodded. Not just the limited detail available of those few pages, but the glossy finish of the repros themselves. A barrier to any sense of the artefact. It was like so many exhibits, on display behind glass when the natural impulse was to reach out and touch. And as a thief, Bev’s instinct was always to break through those barriers.

‘If you can get us access to the tactile element, as it were,’ Felix continued, ‘we’ll be able to get a real sense of age and/or authenticity.’

Real age and authenticity. The same sentiment Mordecan had been driving at. Bev hoped the Star Gypsy would understand and be persuaded to part with the original.

After only one day on the Collection, Mordecan was in danger of becoming a regular at the Caretaker’s Cottage. Still, it was a danger he could live with and if Ms Tarrant wanted to meet him at the wine bar,

who was he to argue with a lady?

Tucked away in the accommodating shadows of a corner booth, Mordecan couldn't resist opening with a wink. 'People will talk.'

'Then we'd best not give them reason to. Mr Mordecan, I need to see the book.'

'Mr Grey anticipated you might ask for a proper viewing about now.' Mordecan dropped a hand to the case on the seat beside him.

'So I have it here with me, as it happens.'

'He did? You do?'

Mordecan relished the way the woman's eyes danced, how she wasn't sure which question to alight on first. 'To tell the truth, he's impressed with you. So much so that he's willing to entrust the book to your care – on a temporary loan basis, of course.'

'Impressed?' Tarrant narrowed her eyes dangerously. 'Are you implying your Mr Grey has been engaging in unauthorised surveillance?'

Mordecan almost coughed. 'No, nothing of that sort. He just has… better eyes and ears than ours. Highly developed senses, you might say. He can't help the way he's made.'

'Even so, if he's somehow able to see and hear what goes on here, I'm not sure I should be so lenient on the question of a visitor's pass.

I think,' she said, 'I should meet with this Mr Grey.'

'Ah now, I'm afraid that's out of the question. He's really very shy. A regular recluse.'

'I don't care if he's –'

'Ms Tarrant, please.' Lifting the silver case onto the table, he slid it under the lady's fine nose. 'I'll talk with him. I'm not saying something couldn't be arranged. But for now, have yourself a read.'

Tarrant simmered, holding his gaze. But they both knew it wasn't any kind of stand-off.

Bev cancelled her appointments for the day; a further step towards confirming her as the boss in the eyes of the staff, but that was only a side effect. The main point was securing time alone with the book.

With their relationship back on an even keel, she felt bad about taking a rain check on dinner with Adrian, but feeling bad was a distraction she was determined to overcome as she settled down to study.

As with the repros, the contents confounded her. She would take breaks from her study to put calls through to the Society, invariably getting Felix on the line – to sound him out and discover that he and his colleagues were just as thoroughly stumped. She was barraged by at least as many diverse opinions as there were members of the Society.

A cryptographical nightmare, the Voynich Manuscript that Cruixley continued to mention was thought to have been written in the 1400s, an unidentified script spelling out an indecipherable language.

Mordecan's artefact was much the same. The work appeared to be divided into sections: opening with page after page of dense text in seductively cursive script, accompanied by diagrams and illustrations that appeared part-anatomical, part-astronomical; the middle appeared to be an atlas of the human brain, areas colour coded or shot through with flowing lines like contours, tagged with labels written in a microscopic hand; the closing sections, sequences of pictograms or cartouches, sometimes neat columns, sometimes winding spirals like the winter counts of Native American tribes.

Some of the drawings were utterly indecipherable, calling nothing to mind no matter which way up she held the page. Others – taken together – were suggestive of the rise of civilisations, spaceships, long journeys, explorations, the rise of civilisations. The stuff of great starfaring histories.

Whatever Bev was reading, there was a sense of breathless scale and such depth, a deeper knowledge beneath the page.

Age lay embedded in the touch and texture of the pages. As her fingers found each edge, turned them with reverent care, she knew exactly what Mordecan had meant. Whatever history was in their acquisitions, the Collection, as a place, could never reproduce that same authenticity. The only way to garner that quality was time. A long, long time.

She had to have the book.

Bev put through a last call to Felix. There's no consensus as yet,' he told her, which was nothing surprising for the Society. 'But there's something to some of the symbols that reminds me of the patterns on the Quire's robes. You could always try consulting them.'

'Yeah, I'd considered that.' Bev wasn't sure if dismissing something instantly qualified as 'considering', but the Quire still irritated and the chances of them saying anything helpful was somewhere below those of the Society reaching agreement.

'You were right,' Bev said eventually. 'About context. If I can find out more about the owner, how he came by the piece, maybe that will unlock some clue.'

Bev closed the comm. With maternal care, she closed the book and put it to bed in its velvet-lined case. She wasn't going to let Mordecan put her off any longer. It was time to meet Mr Grey.

Tracking down Mordecan was simple enough; he had a habit of passing freely to and from his ship. Bev caught up with him on his way out through the reception area.

‘Mr Grey appreciates frequent visits as much as privacy, does he? Well, he won’t mind one more.’

‘Ah, Ms Tarrant.’ The Star Gypsy beamed, hooking his thumbs inside his colourful waistband. ‘I was just coming to fetch you. Mr Grey would very much like to see you now.’

This second-guessing – or clairvoyance or whatever it was – on Mr Grey’s part was getting annoying, but it was Mordecan’s irrepressible warmth and good humour that really set Bev’s temper blazing.

Unfortunately, the lack of obstacles in her path acted as something of a fire break. She would have to let her anger burn itself out in its own time while Mordecan led the way.

They ascended a ramp into an economically lit hold. The gangways and corridors were a gallery of welding scars from hasty repair jobs and stains from leaking fluids. Many of the bulkheads were inset with clear panels, exposing the ship’s workings to casual view, while other stretches were sectioned off with curtains.

The ship had the seasoned, well-travelled appearance of its owner: a testament to shared history.

‘Mind your head. The ceiling’s designed to give Galyari boarding parties cricks in their necks.’

Bev wasn’t in the mood. Ridiculously, she realised she was nervous about the imminent meeting.

Mordecan stood a chivalrous step back as a cabin door slid open.

‘After you.’

Bev took a series of quick, deep breaths as she entered, hand on her comm link. If this was any kind of trap, Collection security would be all over this vessel in the blink of an –

Eyes. She felt them on her before she spun, searching them out.

There at the shadowed end of the cabin, a frail grey figure sat up in bed. The limbs and torso were a pencil sketch, skin stretched like canvas over bones and filled in with translucent watercolour. The way he was propped up against a wall of pillows convinced Bev that he was a patient, a terminally ill one. But it was the face that haunted her – like an attack of deja vu, some past-life horror.

The head was an exaggeration, from ballooning cranium to tapered chin, the face angelic and demonic, infant-like and old as the stars, gibbous eyes like two dark windows into another universe, all her doubts and fears mirrored in their liquid surfaces. A thin lipless mouth offered the ghost of a smile.

Mr Grey was an Alien with a capital A.

He raised a hand. Old man’s fingers, stretched through a mangle; an age in them like the eyes.

Like the pages.

‘You wrote it,’ she said. ‘You wrote the book.’

She glared at Mordecan who had come up beside her. ‘You’ve been playing me. This is the author, right here. You don’t need any expert consultation. You’ve been waving the manuscript under my nose in the hope that I’d buy.’

Mordecan looked pained. ‘A harmless bit of salesmanship, that’s all. The best advertisement for the goods.’

Bev clenched her fist.

‘Please, Ms Tarrant,’ said Mr Grey, his voice playing like a flute whose music permeated deeper than sound. ‘Permit me to explain.’

Bev faced him slowly, fearful of meeting that gaze.

‘The book is my work, yes. It is a compilation of my race’s studies of humanity. My attempt to collect all that knowledge into a single accessible volume that might one day be interpreted and understood by your race. But it can never be a simple matter of a straightforward sale. There are ethical considerations.’

Bev forced herself to speak. ‘Ethical?’

‘Some of the methods used to obtain the source data were… regrettable. I hoped to find someone here on the Collection who might see through that to the true value of the work.’

Suddenly, Mordecan advanced between Bev and Mr Grey. ‘That’s what you’ve had me selling for you?’ He spluttered fitfully. ‘If I’d known I’d been peddling a book of horrors, I’d never have agreed to –’

‘Calm yourself, Mordecan.’

‘Calm myself? Are you kidding? Your lot abducted who knows how many people! Dissections and vivisections and who knows what other kinds of sections!’ He gave a shudder, before turning to look Bev in the eye. ‘Forgive me. It’s not the first time I’ve made a mistake when it comes to trade goods. Probably won’t be my last. But I am sorry to have involved you.’

He walked to the door, but stopped short of storming out. ‘Trust me,’ he told her. ‘This is one golden opportunity you should pass up.’

Mr Grey raised a willowy hand in a gesture that could have been placatory or just as easily a warning. ‘Mordecan, please. You have played the intermediary well and your part is done. The matter now rests in Ms Tarrant’s hands.’

‘You’re damn right it does.’ Bev was relieved to have rediscovered her spine. An old-fashioned stand-off. Her territory. ‘And what’s to stop me from keeping it? Neither you nor Mordecan are in a position to kick up a public stink about it.’

‘You forget, Ms Tarrant.’ Mr Grey turned those eyes on her, an infinite dark. ‘The secrets in that book lay humanity completely open to me. Mind and soul. There are methods by which I might reduce you to a vegetable, or wipe entire tracts of your life from memory. Tell me, Ms Tarrant, which life experiences are you willing to lose? All I

am asking is a fair price for a lifetime's work. The anatomy of the human race.'

Bev stood firm, but she could feel herself backing down inside. 'I need time to think.'

'Time is easily given.'

Bev raised an eyebrow. The Alien didn't look like he had a lot left to give. But the fragility of an artefact was no measure of its power or authority.

She turned and walked away. She needed space as well as time.

And all the space in that cabin was taken up with the placid, penetrating gaze of Mr Grey.

Infuriatingly, Bev was conscious of Mordecan at her heels all the way out through the cargo hold. She stopped him on the ramp.

'You really think it matters then? How the knowledge was obtained? It's ancient history, surely?'

He hovered on the threshold, glancing warily back inside, a captain afraid to board his own ship. Eventually, he could only shrug. 'If the fruit from the tree of knowledge was made of human flesh, would you still take a bite?'

Bev snorted. 'When you put it like that. Me, I'm not sure it's quite so simple. Now, if you'll excuse me.'

She walked off, abandoning the captain to his ship.

In the case of To Buy versus Not To Buy, the Society would doubtless present her with countless exhibits from history, almost certainly citing Nazi science and the Mithran experiments.

Bev still carried the scars from what the Fifth Axis had done to her.

She figured she might ask Adrian. People often mistook his gruffness as a guarantee of directness, whereas Bev knew there was more to him than that. At the same time, she could count on his honest opinion and, most of all, he offered someone trustworthy she could bounce her thoughts off.

She should have asked him. But Bev was fairly sure her mind was already made up.

When it came to difficult negotiations, a gun was a useful bargaining tool but the real weapon was the will to use one. Bev tucked the blaster in her belt and kept the intent vividly crystallised in her eyes as she faced Mr Grey, sparing the Alien the trouble of probing too deeply.

If he could play mind tricks, she was counting on the probability that they would take time. Time enough for her to draw and shoot.

Time she would put to good use.

She produced the credpad in her offhand – keeping her gun hand free – and flashed the display in front of him, watching the figures

dance in glassy blackness.

'I don't know what your price is, but that's what I'm willing to pay. One touch and the transfer's done.' She flipped the pad around and held her thumb over the button. Take it or leave it.'

The Alien's eyes swept over her like a couple of black searchlights. His decision hung suspended behind those eyes, coalescing with the patience of the universe.

Something Bev didn't share. 'Well?' she said.

Mr Grey assented with a serene nod. 'Your terms are acceptable.'

At the press of the button, Bev felt the tension ready to escape, but she held on to it until she was out in the corridor and free to let it out in an uncool, unqualified sigh of relief.

She had faced down an Alien with a capital A.

'Ah yes, haggling takes it out of me too sometimes.' Mordecan was there with a smile.

Bev straightened. 'I suggest, Mr Mordecan, you take yourself and your Very Important Passenger and leave. A.S.A.P.'

'Way ahead of you, Ms Tarrant. Way ahead of you.'

Bev marched down the corridor, putting that accent out of earshot as quickly as her stride allowed.

Bev had a stack of appointments and her in-tray was developing into an administrative Tower of Babel. It could all fall down; she didn't care. For the second time that week, she cleared her diary.

Of course, things would have to settle back to normal sooner or later, and the volume was a long study – a lifetime's work. Before too long she was going to have to call on the Collection's resources, entrust the book to the surgical intellects of the Society. Some of them might question the ethics of her unilateral acquisition, but she would just have to pick and choose who she told.

For now, it was between her and the lovingly crafted pages at her fingertips.

In any job, the best part. The prize.

Satisfied that the ship was under way, Mordecan wandered aft to look in on Mr Grey. According the courtesy of a polite knock, he strode in and was greeted with a bang like a compressed-air pistol going off.

A cork ricocheted off the ceiling and came in for a bumpy landing close to Mordecan's feet. He stooped to pick it up, bouncing it in his palm as he sauntered over to receive the proffered glass of champagne.

Mr Grey poured himself a generous one and they clinked their glasses in time-honoured tradition. 'Cheers,' said Mordecan and sent the bubbly *down the hatch.*

'My congratulations on a well-conceived and profitable venture.'

The alien's eyes were agleam with admiration. 'I am sure my people could have learned a great deal from studying one such as you.'

Mordecan tipped his head modestly. 'Ah well, flattering as that is, the thing you need to remember is, humans are really a simple lot – simple needs, simple desires. There's not really enough mystery to fill a book.'

'Apparently so.' Mr Grey nodded. 'Which made my task of making up an entire volume a considerable challenge.'

'Not to worry. I appreciate seeing an artist at work. We'll divvy up the proceeds, fair and square.' Mordecan chuckled as he dropped into a chair and stretched out his legs.

'I wonder how long it will take Ms Tarrant to realise she has been deceived.'

'That rather depends on how bright she is.'

'And we were fortunate that your friend was not in residence.'

Mordecan sighed and kicked off his boots. 'We were a little bit lucky, I'll grant you. And if I want to keep in touch with Benny, I'd best confine myself to postcards for the foreseeable future.'

He raised his glass for a refill and another satisfying clink.

He grinned. 'To absent friends.'

The Tree that Was

Steven Kitson

‘So you see,’ said Bernice as she launched the missile, ‘when the astonishingly devastating warhead hits that planet, it’s goodbye celestial object – along with billions of innocent inhabitants but also, and this is the important bit, also goodbye hideously evil monsters who are *at this moment* harvesting said inhabitants (meaning they are effectively already dead, or worse) in order to turn them into an army of conquest that will sweep across the galaxy killing and enslaving squillions. And you’re saying I was wrong to press that button?’

‘I am saying, Professor Summerfield, that “wrong” is just as simplistic a term as “right”. I am saying that we can consider any situation, including your monster-based dilemma, from a number of perspectives. I’m also saying, please don’t use my students for target practice as part of your thought experiments.’

‘Oh, was that one yours? Sorry. They all look alike from up here.’

The half-dozen tables stretched along the Great Hall like an exercise in perspective. Up and down each were close-packed bodies identically carapaced in black gowns, only distinguishable by hairstyle or the occasional flash of colour from a hood denoting some higher degree. The victim of Bernice’s thrown bread roll, which had been standing in for the astonishingly devastating warhead, was still making occasional glances over his shoulder.

His gaze never strayed upwards: apparently he dismissed out of hand the notion that his nemesis might have been nibbling innocently at a carrot stick on the raised platform that supported High Table.

‘His thesis is on the Thomist revival of the twenty-second century. A thesis that has been ready for months, though he refuses to submit. He persists in finding excuses to change chapters around.’

‘He’s afraid of facing the future. You need to kick him out of the nest. Take his next draft and submit it.’

Enjoying her new best friend’s slightly stunned expression, Bernice resumed her ongoing quest to ensure a refill with every passing of the waiter. Halfway through her second gulp she remembered why this was a mistake.

‘The Collection itself lost several important works during its occupation by the Axis, didn’t it?’ Ms Crozier’s voice was nasal and preceded her around corners by at least five steps.

Both qualities had helped Bernice avoid her during the two weeks she’d spent annoying everyone on the Collection by demanding

provenances for all artworks acquired since the fall of the Fifth Axis.

Bernice had been looking forward to her trip to Columbanus until Crozier had turned up, flashing Galactopol credentials and demanding to share the shuttle ride. Only the thought that the detective wasn't going to be joining her on the return journey had sustained Bernice – until she found that they had been seated next to each other at the welcome Hall.

That was when Bernice had decided to make fast friends with Professor Fulton Stanley, the diner on her other side, who turned out to be an ageing applied ethicist and easy to engage in a good-natured spat.

She kept her glass to her lips and, moving just her eyes, glanced around in case Crozier was addressing someone else; but no, her plan had been so successful that every other one of Crozier's neighbours had adopted it with gusto. The blasted woman must have been waiting to pounce.

'Um… yes, several. Couldn't tell you off the top of my head what they were…'

'Iolate's *Study in Blue.* Six self-portraits by Donner –'

'Egomaniac.'

'– Pearse's *School Scene.* Even Cooke's *Passion.'*

'Now, that almost sounds interesting.'

'And those are just the ones which my information suggests might have passed though this very…'

She glanced around the portrait-panelled hall, searching for a word to describe the totality of Columbanus.

'… place,' she eventually finished. 'The Axis fell three years ago, but most of the works they plundered have still not been recovered. They could be in the hands of criminals or unscrupulous collectors. They could be financing any number of these Primeiros who we are only just now uncovering in the chaos the Axis left behind. But where they aren't, is with their rightful owners.'

Bernice glanced behind her for refuge, but Fulton was jabbing his finger at the next Fellow along. The wine waiter, though, was approaching with what might just be her salvation. With a face that would have made a Stoic proud she turned back to Crozier. 'Do tell me all about it.'

'You would require us all to be heroes.'

'Just to be human.'

'With an unerring sense of morality? With Solomon's wisdom to apply it? Through here.'

The interrupted argument had continued once the gong had rung and the Fellows and their guests had filed out; then kept going

through coffee in the Master's study, and through the jumble of streets, courts, greens and pieces that lay between Hall and Stanley's staircase.

The interior of Columbanus was a circle three miles in radius, centred on the Hall and its attached chapel. Slightly dished, the curve was only noticeable on the longest streets; and all under a vast stone dome with the crystal that served as the scholars' sun embedded in its apex. A sun that was now, after vespers, dimmed to moon-brightness.

Stanley led Bernice into a narrow opening in an otherwise blank wall. From the vaulted passage they emerged on the short edge of a rectangle. Five storeys of intricate chiselled arches and Ionic demi-columns lining the stonework acted as background to the space's single occupant.

A tree that looked exactly like a child's drawing: a slender trunk topped by billowing clouds of green that reached just higher than the surrounding walls.

Stanley had stopped beside her, leaning on his stick and watching her face. She wasn't going to let herself be hurried into reacting, though. Eventually she said, 'It looks lonely.'

'I hadn't thought of that. Perhaps it would prefer to be with the others, in the gardens or down by the river. But it does have an important job to do. That may comfort it.'

'Job? It… shades the paving stones?'

'It stands between – it divides or it unites, depending on your point of view – the faculties of Divinity and Philosophy.' He pointed to the only exits other than the one they had just come through, identical square openings in the middle of the rectangle's long sides. The tree stood firmly between them. 'Officially, its name is the Divinity Faculty's Elm. It is universally referred to as the Tree of Knowledge.'

'I see.'

'No, you don't.'

'No, I don't. It's a tree. It's nice and quirky and academic and all, having it here, but it's just a tree. We even have some on the Collection. I had a little one in my room, until my son tried to eat the leaves.'

'What is it that is unusual about the court in which we're standing?'

Bernice opened her mouth.

'Other than the tree in the middle.'

She closed it again. Looked around. Stone walls. Stone paving. Far above, in the murky darkness of night on Columbanus, the stone sky that kept space at bay. She shrugged.

'Enough standing in the cold.' The syncopated slap-slap-thud of shoes and stick resumed as Stanley made his way, trailing Bernice, towards the left – Philosophical, rather than Divine – archway.

‘Justify,’ he ordered.

Bernice obliged. ‘You see what’s right and you do it. That’s how it works. It’s only you philosophers who have to overcomplicate things. Look, you’ve studied ethics for… a few years.’

‘Some years.’

‘Right, well, does it make you a better person?’

‘Dear me, no.’

‘And that’s my point. We don’t have to study to know the difference between right and wrong, everybody does. Well, most of us do, the ones who don’t there’s something wrong with. We might have trouble doing what’s right, but we don’t mistake what is right.’

The staircase was halfway along the passageway. Stanley turned himself square-on to the first step, lifted up his stick and planted the end firmly in the dished depression worn by centuries of students, coming down slightly more full of knowledge than they went up. The opposite hand went next, onto a banister brutally bolted into the ancient stonework; then, with his whole weight supported just by his arms, one foot and then the other. Then the stick again.

Bernice hovered beside as he step-by-stepped his way up, around the corner, and to the first landing. ‘Couldn’t they find you a room on the ground floor?’

‘I never asked.’

She shut up.

Unlocking his door he apologised for not inviting her in. ‘I am afraid that my days of debating until dawn are long behind me. But I should like to continue our discussion.’

‘Well, I’ll be here for the full slingshot round the Collection. Our Acting Director has me under strict orders to make as many friends as possible –’

‘Ah, the incident with the ghosts.’

‘– so I’m sure we can arrange something.’

She’d reached the second step when she heard his door open again. He stood in the doorway looking smaller than before. ‘A thinking-point perhaps, to discuss at our next meeting.’

‘Homework?’

‘Forgive me, perhaps I’m too used to dealing with supervisees.’

‘No no, go on.’

‘These instances when you clearly see the right, when you do not fail to do it… Do you never wonder if, perhaps, what seemed right was not?’

‘And wake up at three in the morning, begging to be allowed to do it all over again? Of course. That’s why we have vodka.’

‘I see. Good night, Professor Summerfield.’

‘So were you ever going to tell me?’

‘Professor Summerfield, it was felt that, although tragic, there was no need to allow this event, this tragic event, to spoil an otherwise successful relationship-building programme.’

‘You lied to me! You told me he was resting! I had to overhear it from the catering staff!’

‘I will speak to the Master of the Kitchens.’

‘Don’t you dare think the old “miss the point” gambit is going to get me off the subject, oh no. I’ve used that one myself.’ She noticed his gaze dropping to the gap between her choker and the neck-line of her dress, where she could feel her anger beginning to flush. ‘Or pretending to cop an eyeful.’

‘Pretending, Professor Summerfield?’

Damn, he was good. Her train of thought almost jumped the points, but she managed to keep her righteous indignation on the proper target. For once. ‘I want to see him.’

He sighed. He’d taken his best shot, and knew when he was beaten.

‘This way, please.’

They left the Hall, cleared of its tables now and with a string quartet on the platform, through a side door set into the panelling.

No one seemed to notice the guest of honour’s departure.

Following the Dean across courtyards and through creaking iron gates, she took a moment off from her worry to enjoy his discomfort.

After so many times being the one trying to hide some disaster from the VIPs, it was fascinating to see the process from the other side.

The whole trip had been fascinating, really. According to Bev’s memo, the city-sized spaceship had asked permission to save fuel by skirting around the (suspiciously deep) gravity well in which the Collection sat. Apparently, there’d been frantic discussion about how to turn it to the best advantage of the Collection. Discussion that had ended with Bev bribing Benny to do her dirty work for her.

The slingshot manoeuvre would take a full seven days, so it was eventually negotiated that a delegate from each institution would transfer to the other. As the two celestial objects began their dance, they would spend the week being wined and dined. Each would then return to their own institution. The Columbanus ambassador to spread the word among the galaxy’s academic community about what a respectable, worthwhile and, no, really, not populated by homicidal spectres place the Collection was; Bernice to describe the delights of a five-hundred-year-old spacegoing wine cellar to her jealous associates.

She’d even found time to continue her discussion with Stanley, though no conclusions had been reached – which was why she’d been surprised when he hadn’t been at her farewell do.

She should have been suspicious there and then, but food and music

had lulled her while the Dean explained that her new friend's age had caught up with him and he'd gone for an early night.

Another mystery solved: she'd often wondered why those VIPs she'd struggled to keep from discovering the awful truth had seemed so dumb. Flattery, canapes, and wine, made complacency just so much easier than suspicion.

The infirmary was crammed into a Tudor pile, all whitewash caged behind timber. Stanley lay in a room too small for the equipment which crowded him, reaching out to penetrate his skin at half a dozen different points. A clear tube violated his throat, kissing life into his lungs.

'We didn't want you to have to see that.'

'Maybe he just fell.' But then she imagined him forcing himself from his room to the top of the staircase, how long that would have taken.

'There's no walkway on Tree Court roof. The access is just for maintenance, by trap door. Locked trap door. He broke it open with his stick and hauled himself through. He might have gone up intending to come down the slow way, but if so there was something up there he wanted very badly.'

'But why would he do this?'

The Dean shrugged. 'He was worried about his family. Contact with his home system became patchy a year or so ago. Then we see in the news reports that the authorities there had been over-run by one of these criminal gangs, these, these…'

'Primeiros,' Benny prompted.

'Yes. Primeiros walked through the defences and took over. Everyone just thought it was backwater troubles, but he hadn't heard from his family since. Maybe he couldn't take the not knowing.'

'Do you think? That doesn't seem like him.'

'How well did you know him?'

'Not very. We mostly talked philosophy. But…'

'Then you knew him as well as anyone here. I doubt we'll ever know why, unless he wakes up and tells us. And that, apparently, is against the odds.'

'He deserves better.'

'No doubt he does, but he made the choice.'

Bernice walked up to the bed, but stopped before touching Stanley.

'Who was the last person to see him? I mean, last before…'

'He had a supervision with his student, I believe.' And then he saw the intent in her eyes. 'Professor Summerfield… we really must get back to Hall.'

'Look, your university is lovely. I'll tell everyone how great it is. I will return spectre-related favours and mention nothing about suicides

among the faculty. Just tell me where this student lives.'

He wasn't in his room. The manifestation of Bernice, purple-gowned, steely eyed and crimson-nosed, in the JCR caused a momentary hush even among a crowd of students desperate to prove they had seen it all. A few questions and he was revealed: on a seat moulded into the wall, hunched over a half-empty pint.

'Andy, isn't it? I'd buy you another, but…' she waved vaguely to indicate the pocketlessness of her outfit.

''S all right,' he said, and took another mouthful.

She flopped down beside him. 'Neo-Thomists, right?'

That got his attention.

'I was stuck in a lift with a neo-Thomist once. Almost stuck his virtues up his esse.' No reaction. Too much too soon. And besides, the guy in the lift had ended up being hurled off a cliff by a possessed robo-valet, so best to get off that subject. 'Professor Stanley told me that was your field. He liked you. At least, he liked you enough to tell me to stop throwing bread rolls at you.' A flicker of recognition.

'Though I was aiming for the guy at the next table.'

'You knew Professor Stanley?'

'I thought I did, a little anyway.'

Silence. Another mouthful.

'The Dean says you were the last person to –' she noticed him flinch. 'Sorry. He said you had a supervision with him, this afternoon.'

Nod.

'Did he seem…'

'No different.'

'Ah.'

He drained the last of the beer. 'Nobody else even asked.'

Bernice's turn to nod.

'I don't think they care. But what do I know? I'm just a student.' For the first time he looked at her.

'What do you know?'

'He got a letter. During the supervision. Robin the porter delivered it. He didn't read it, just put it on his desk.'

'Thank you.'

His hand on hers as she rose. 'You'll tell me, won't you? When you find out why.'

'If I think Professor Stanley would want me to.'

He looked relieved. 'I was right to trust you.'

It took three minutes to blag the key from a porter. She was slipping.

Stanley's study was low-ceilinged, bookcase-lined, and paper-strewn. After a quick glance over the desktop, Bernice, with the instinct of an archaeologist, headed for the basket underneath.

First notable thing was that his waste paper divided into two types.

Most of it was dumped in straight (drafts of articles mainly, covered in correctional scribbles), but the bottom was a nest of tightly packed balls, crumpled with such violence that it took careful work to peel one of them flat without ripping it. One side was blank, the other covered with stick-man doodles: figures in various poses, no coherent scene that she could make out. Not even a consistent gravity. She unpicked another ball, found the same. Another and another, and she started to see repetitions of particular poses.

One figure, repeated more often than any other, had something in his hand, a pouch or bag. Sometimes two would be together, one touching the other's head or arm; sometimes lines that might have been fences or trees, blobs that might have been bushes or stormclouds.

She tried rotating the pages but she couldn't make them fit. Maybe they were just disconnected doodles, each entire in itself. But there seemed to be a bigger picture she was missing.

Though it was, she reminded herself, the wrong bigger picture. She dumped the doodle-bearing leaves back into the bin and tried to decide where to start excavating for the letter. If she had to search the whole room it could take all night.

Wait, though. He'd received the letter in here. He'd put it on his desk, Andy said. But that didn't mean he read it here. This was his study, this was for work. If it was a personal letter, and to provoke that reaction, it must have been…

She swivelled to the little door with its peeling black paint, snug between two bookcases.

Bernice stepped lightly over the threshold, as if even in the infirmary he might hear her invasion and wake up. The bedroom was even smaller than the study, so that even without the clutter it felt more cramped. There was another desk, this one supporting photographs – Stanley himself in a few, getting younger until she had to guess at which face was his – and one single piece of paper.

She read it.

Andy found her sitting beneath the tree of knowledge, hoping for a windfall. 'Um… hello.'

'Morning.'

'I'm, I don't think I asked your name.'

'Bernice.' She shuffled along the bench.

It took a while after he sat down for him to speak again. 'Did you… find anything?'

'Yes and no.' She handed him the letter.

'Should I read this?'

‘Probably not. I did.’

It wasn’t long. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘The Draconian Empire has grabbed most of the sector next to Professor Stanley’s home. On top of Galactopol moving in, it was enough. The Primeiros got scared and left. The Professor’s family are all safe and well.’

‘I understand what it says, I mean I don’t understand… isn’t that good news?’

‘Maybe he really hated his family.’ Frames on a desktop. Smiles frozen in time. ‘I don’t think so, though.’

‘He definitely read it? Maybe he was afraid it would be something else.’

‘He read it. I’ve just realised something.’

‘What?’

She cringed at the excitement in his voice. ‘Sorry. Didn’t mean to get your hopes up. I meant that the first day I was here, Professor Stanley asked me what was unusual about this courtyard.’

‘There are no windows.’

‘Is what I just realised.’ The stonework in the walls, all carved with arches and openings just like the other neoclassical parts of the university’s patchwork architecture… but here, only blank stone between the half-columns.

‘It’s for the tree.’

‘It’s allergic to eyes?’

‘No, it’s, um, for context. For what the tree means. The courtyard was built and the tree was planted by the seventh Chair of Divinity, three hundred years ago. It’s supposed to symbolise reality, truth, that sort of thing. What both the theologians and the philosophers are searching for. That’s why it’s between the faculties.’

‘A tree symbolises all that?’

‘The seventh Chair had a sense of humour, apparently. It’s a reference to Ronald Knox’s limerick on Berkeley’s idealism.’

Bernice blinked a couple of times.

‘The one about how God must be surprised by the tree’s existence when nobody’s in the quad to observe it.’

‘Now that does ring faint bells. All the way from my own undergraduate days. Wasn’t there a –’

‘Professor Summerfield!’

‘Oh, please, not now.’

‘Professor Summerfield, I am not your secretary.’

‘Finally, a reason to be happy.’ She turned to see Ms Crozier striding towards them, a bundle of paper under her arm and fire in her eyes.

‘Excuse me, Professor?’

‘I said, why pick this precise moment to deny it?’

‘Because if I were your secretary, I would be happy to run around this place delivering your messages. As it is, if you’re expecting to be informed when your friends wake up –’

Bernice’s eyes widened.

‘– you should make yourself contactable –’

She sprinted for the exit.

‘– and, furthermore, explain to them that just because we –’

Mid-tirade, Crozier moved to intercept her.

‘– arrived on the same –’

The inevitable happened.

The impact knocked Crozier back. Bernice, her momentum greater, found her head overtaking her tangling legs. She twisted through the cloud of ejected leaflets before ending up with her cheek pressed to the cold stone.

An out-of-focus leaflet see-sawed through the air to land just in front of her face. Beyond that, she could see Crozier seething. Andy was vacillating in the background, unsure which woman to aid first. And over in the infirmary, Stanley had woken up.

Still, her days of scrambling to her feet were over, at least when not being actively pursued by something deadly. She raised herself up on to her elbow –

She stopped, picked up the leaflet. ‘STOLEN MASTERPIECES: HOW YOU CAN HELP’ was the title, and above it a badly reproduced painting of a semi-naked man surrounded by a crowd of onlookers having some kind of circlet placed on his brow. One figure touching another’s head, a pose she’d seen before…

The picture disappeared as a newly upright Crozier snatched the leaflet away. ‘Thank you, Professor Summerfield. I trust you’ll help me with the rest?’

‘What’s the picture on the front?’

‘Christ’s Passion. Esther Cooke’s magnum opus, and one of the greatest works of the twenty-third century. Plundered from your very Collection by the Axis. And if you ever want to see it returned, I suggest you get up from there and –’

Bernice was already up. ‘Sorry, busy. Andy, go see Professor Stanley. Tell him I won’t be long. Don’t let him pass out again.’

The student perked up, glad to have clear instructions, and bolted.

‘Now I will just need that she snatched the leaflet back to check something, and you have a very nice day, you hear?’

Andy retreated to leave her alone with Stanley. She shut the door softly. ‘Why did you do it?’

‘You worked it out.’ The tube was gone, replaced by a mask that he clasped to his face several times a sentence.

‘I guessed. I didn’t know if I was right.’

‘A couple of years ago, a conference I attended with Andy. Primeiros just getting a foothold. Didn’t know who they were then. No one knew. But, somehow. They knew. About my nephew. He worked in the planetary defence system. I told them I didn’t know much. Nephew’s not stupid. But, things do slip out.’

‘And you told them.’

‘They said. Hurt Andy.’

‘You’re very fond of him.’

‘Like son.’

She nodded. ‘So, these Primeiros have grabbed some of the stuff the Axis left lying around, weapons, materials. Artworks. They’re trying to carve out their own little empire, find a bolthole or maybe just somewhere to pillage and burn. But your system’s defence grid is too strong, so they make you tell them just enough to work out where the weak spots are, something so innocuous that nobody would think to classify it but they’re cunning. Because sadistic little criminals always are. They break though. They take over. When did they give you the painting?’

‘Was in my room when we got back. No note. Think to incriminate me. Had to hide it.’

‘In your rooms?’

‘No.’

‘And then yesterday, you find out that they’ve run off, and somehow, all your family survived. Survived when who knows how many of their fellows died because of you. You didn’t jump because of despair. You jumped because of guilt.’

‘You were right.’

‘I found your drawings.’

‘No. First night. Debate. You were right. All my arguments, justifications. Did wrong. Knew it. You were right.’

‘Oh no. No, I didn’t mean you… I didn’t… Couldn’t you have found some vodka?’

‘Not be a hero. Just be human.’

‘You were. You are.’

‘One regret. Should have left a note. People should know. What I did.’ This time he took a long, deep breath from the mask. ‘Can’t write now, so you have to tell. Make sure everyone knows what I am.’

‘Oh, no.’

‘Yes. See the right thing. Do it.’

‘But your family.’

‘Should know.’

‘Look, I didn’t say anything. Nobody knows outside this room.’

‘Doesn’t matter. Nobody observes. But sins continue to be.’

Damn! Her brain was doing it again, trying to remind her of something. She ignored it. ‘You can’t ask me to destroy your reputation. I just met you.’

He was reaching for the mask every word now. ‘Talked. Sense.’

‘I can’t.’

He took several deep breaths before gathering his strength. By his side graphs were spiking, numbers rising and turning red. ‘Must!’

‘Okay! Okay, calm down. Look, don’t explode your heart or something, and you can tell them yourself, if you still want to. I’ll send Andy in. Tell him, if you can.’

She waited for a reply, but the mask stayed on his face. His eyelids started to droop.

‘Professor Stanley? Fulton?’

Then alarms were going off, white coats flooded in and Benny felt herself being gently ejected. Andy grabbed her sleeve. ‘What’s happened?’

She just looked at him. She wanted to explain but something was nagging at her, something Stanley had said, something she should remember… she pointed her finger in his face. ‘There was another limerick, wasn’t there? A reply. How did it go?’

‘Um, a, I am always, no, um, right. Dear sir, your astonishment’s odd – I am always about in the quad.’

‘And that’s why the tree,’ they continued together. ‘Will continue to be –’ Bernice broke off. ‘Thank you.’

And she turned and ran.

Andy looked though the glass in the door, trying to make sense of the frenzied motion. ‘Since observed by yours faithfully. God,’ he finished under his breath.

* * *

Tree Court was empty by the time she reached it, Crozier having gathered up all her leaflets and gone to Bernice didn’t care where.

She headed right for the tree. The first branches were just low enough for a pair of strong arms to grab: Bernice’s arms weren’t that strong, but she had legs that could help and soon she was scrambling upwards.

It was nestled in a cleft in the trunk, invisible from the ground. A silver tube, three feet long, an end-cap that unscrewed with a hiss of preservative gas.

Crozier’s leaflets had done it no more justice than Stanley’s doodles. Even viewed under far from perfect conditions Bernice could see why it was so regarded. She winced to look at the thorns biting into Jesus’ brow. She could make out each disciple in the crowd: Peter with his keys, Philip with his basket and John with his book, expressions

captured as if from life. The two Marys in the foreground, turned away from the action and towards the viewer, supporting each other. Pain on their faces.

And at the side, in the shadow, ever separate, the traitor with his bag of silver. His name still a curse millennia later.

She rolled the canvas up and slipped it back into the tube, which made a popping sound as it resealed. She stowed it back into its hiding-place and dropped to the ground just in time for Andy to arrive. He wasn't running, so she knew what he was going to say before he opened his mouth.

'I'm sorry. Did you get to speak to him?'

Andy shook his head. 'You heard his last words. Did he say… did you find out why… what happened?'

'Yes. Yes, I did.'

'Is it okay for you to tell me?'

You see what's right.

She nodded.

And you do it.

'He was happy to hear that his family were safe. He went up to the roof to… to get a new perspective on things. On top of the world. It was stupid. He slipped. He fell. It was an accident.'

Andy's head was tilted. But he wanted to believe.

'Make sure his family know.'

'I will.'

'And submit your thesis.'

'I'll do that too.'

She watched him go to spread the lie. She'd go back to her room, get her kit bag. It had gloves, cleaning agents, everything you might need to preserve finds on a dig – or to remove all trace of fingerprints, DNA, and anything else that could connect the painting to either her or Stanley. She'd leave it somewhere it would be discovered after her shuttle left, when Columbanus was heading back into deep space.

Crozier would make her find, eventually it would be back in the Collection. Maybe Bernice could even bring herself to look at it again some day.

You see what's right. And you do it.

So why was she glad that tonight she'd be in her own rooms, back on the Collection, where she knew there was a bottle of vodka close at hand?

Perspectives: Forging a Bond

Philip Purser-Hallard

‘Why did you say that?’ Bev barked.

Long ago in the future, that voice had stopped police and security guards in their tracks across half the galaxy, and chilled the blood of her occasional unlucky hostage. It caused the Quire clansman to raise a polite eyebrow.

‘The Collection maintains at least one archive of known forgeries,’ Bifolium said. ‘The Rappare Bequest. I had assumed that this was one such holding.’

‘Well, it’s not.’ Bev glared down at her desk, where the Grey Manuscript lay open, between piles of reference books, scatterings of her own handwritten notes and lengthy memoranda from ‘the Society’.

Bev hadn’t been too bothered when Bifolium had stopped by her office with some random trivial enquiry about the Collection’s gravity generators. Up until that point, she’d continued to regard him as the friendliest of the Quire for no real discernible reason.

Then he’d peered at the manuscript with keen interest for a moment or two, before declaring it a fake.

‘What do you mean – a fake?’ she asked again. She felt more shaken than she ought to be. After all that agonising, the Society’s researches, her own manoeuvring with Mordecan and Grey… the idea that there might be something wrong with the manuscript was difficult to bear.

And was ridiculous, of course. She knew the manuscript was real – she’d met its author. Indeed, she’d paid him a large amount of money for it.

Bifolium’s variegated forehead creased. ‘Are you labouring under the impression that this is a language, Bev?’ he asked, tracing a nailless finger across the glyphs and pictograms.

So that was all this ludicrous idea was based on. ‘It’s *alien,’* she snapped.

‘And yet the symbolic morphology conforms to no theoretically possible linguistic scheme, alien or otherwise. The illustrations are nonsensical, and the pseudo-alphabetic symbols resemble arthropods in the process of expiring. It cannot convey content.’

God, the Quire reminded her of Brax at times. Or Benny, even. Or any number of the academics here. They were so smug, so supercilious…

…Bollocks. The snooty bastard had to be right, though, didn’t he?

She had – after all – paid the author a great deal of money for it.

Mordecan and Grey. *Those bastards.*

'It might have value as a semi-abstract work of art,' Bifolium conceded with a smile.

'It couldn't be in code?' she asked briskly. 'Or a constructed language?'

'No,' he said gravely. 'I could explain the algorithms, if you so wish. Depending on the level of your background in theoretical linguistics, we might conclude such a study within weeks.'

'Thank you,' she told him very, very calmly, 'but no. Now please get out of my office.'

That was yesterday.

'Dorso,' she says now. 'So glad that you were able to make the time to see me.'

The Quire woman stands before her desk, as patient and self-contained as Bifolium was. 'You sent for one of us,' she points out, sounding mildly affronted.

'Yes. There's something I want to tell you.'

Dorso does that infuriating slow nod of theirs. 'Very well.'

Bev takes a deep breath, relishing her calmness. 'We are concerned,' she says, 'about your clan's attitude. Gravely concerned. You're our guests here, and we expect you to treat us with courtesy and consideration. *But,'* she adds as Dorso opens her mouth, 'you haven't done anything of the kind. The academics – let alone our other residents – see you as arrogant, rude and patronising. They think of you as condescending know-it-alls, coming here from your oh-so-distant future with your superior knowledge, looking down –' she stops. 'I'm just outlining a widespread perception, you understand?'

Dorso says coolly, 'I believe so, Bev.'

'You think – There's a *perception* that you think you can treat us like primitives, talk down to us, never show us what you're really like –' *Careful.* 'Well, we assume so. I mean, you aren't so formal and… standoffish amongst yourselves, surely?'

The clansman looks quite taken aback. 'Naturally not, but surely you would not expect –'

'Your attitude,' Bev says, 'is harming this Collection. I'm sorry to appear inhospitable, but if we don't see some changes, I'll have no choice but to revoke Mr Braxiatel's invitation. As you'll have gathered, Mr Braxiatel's name is no longer held in great favour around here, and many of the staff see you as yet another irritation he imposed on them before he… left. My job is to keep the Collection running smoothly, and my… the faculty's resentment of you is making it impossible for me to do that job.'

‘That is unfortunate,’ Dorso agrees. ‘Have you a suggestion as to how we should proceed?’

‘Yes,’ Bev says, ‘I have a suggestion. My suggestion – and I realise that your people sometimes have difficulty with understatement, so perhaps we’d better call it an *ultimatum* – is that you all make an effort to fit in around here, or I’ll have Doggles re-establish the time corridor tomorrow and send the lot of you home.’

You and your sodding monkeys, she thinks.

Not that Doggles actually has the know-how to achieve that, not without the Quire’s cooperation. She’s hoping that Dorso doesn’t realise this.

‘What must we do to “fit in”?’ the Quire woman asks.

‘Treat us as your equals, not your inferiors. Behave with us as you’d behave with one another.’ She’s troubled by a sudden alarming vision of the clan pursuing her around the Mansionhouse, their arms outstretched for a big hug. ‘Or as we treat each other, at least. Deal with us on our own terms. Just… try to fit in.’

Dorso inclines her head once again. ‘I will discuss the matter with my clan. We will respond to your ultimatum.’

‘Good. That’s great,’ Bev says. ‘Same time tomorrow, then?’

Of course, she won’t be able to resist the temptation to listen in on the clan’s discussion tonight. It will be predictably childish, surreal and beset by random squabbles and digressions, but in the muddle two things will become obvious to her.

Firstly, the Quire are desperate to remain and to complete their studies on the Collection – whatever those might actually be. Second, the prospect of being more sociable is, in some obscure way, terrifying to them.

In the end, though, the first impulse – what Bev will suppose has to be considered their professionalism – will win over the second.

Whatever *that’s* all about.

‘Dorso told us all what you said,’ Colophon, the hairy one she met in the Lenticular Library, will tell her tomorrow. ‘We talked about it all night. It was really difficult.’ He’ll certainly look exhausted, lolling back in one of Bev’s office armchairs.

‘And?’ Bev will prompt him curtly.

‘It’s yes. Our answer’s yes. We’ll make an effort to fit in, just like you said.’

This will be no more than Bev expects, but still she’ll let out a slow, grateful breath. ‘You’ll try not to be so damn superior from now on?’

‘Yes,’ Colophon will say, and scratch his furry armpit.

‘Good,’ she’ll say. ‘I have to admit that’s a weight off my mind, Colophon.’

‘I’m glad.’ He’ll sound like a small boy on his best behaviour. ‘We

really didn't mean to upset people. We like it here. We like you all very much. You're a good friend to our clan, Bev.'

He'll beam then – a sudden, very genuine smile – and Bev will find herself warming to him. She'll say, 'There's an informal reception tonight. The Inhumanities Department's mid-term bash. My partner Adrian and I are both invited, but since it's an informal thing there won't have been an invitation to your clan. But we'd like you to come with us, Colophon. As our guest.'

The prospect won't fill her with unalloyed delight, but she'll consider it vital to test these new ground rules as soon as possible.

'That will be lovely,' Colophon will say. 'Should I bring some alcoholic drink with me? Have I got that right?'

'That would be great.'

'Bad luck about that manuscript, by the way,' he'll say. 'It must have looked very convincing. It becomes a famous hoax, though – Mr Grey will play the same trick time and time again. It's about three thousand years before anyone twigs.'

Bev will seethe. *More futuristic knowledge*, she'll groan.

Except… 'Wait a minute. So Bifolium knew that already? He didn't work it out by applying some bloody algorithm?'

'No.' Colophon will grin. 'He knew about it because it was a hoax. Practical jokes are a bit of a hobby with Bifolium. You'll find that out when you get to know him.'

And he'll wink a telescope-eye at her.

The Two-Level Effect

Eddie Robson

'Jason, why don't you do something useful with yourself?' Bev asks me. From the tone of her voice you'd think using her desk to play shove ha'penny with some old coffee-cup lids was annoying in some way.

'Such as?' I ask.

'Anything. I literally think that *anything* else would be more useful than what you're currently doing.'

I explain calmly and patiently that, since she was the one who put me on the Collection's payroll, I am sort of relying on her to find useful things for me to do. I word this really carefully because I don't want to describe her as my boss.

'Bernice insisted that I take you on,' says Bev. 'And I only did it as a favour to keep you out of trouble. I don't need you.'

'I'm doing *you* a favour because you're short-staffed and no bugger'll come and work for you any more.'

'I am not short-staffed.'

'No, of course not. And how much sleep did you get last night? Three hours?'

Bev pauses, shoots me a quick glance. 'Three and a *half.'*

'I apologise, obviously you're coping just fine.'

Neither of us says anything for a few seconds, so I shrug and shove another lid across the desk. Bev flinches.

'I'd planned on having you handle the file for complaints about the Quire, but that seems to have dropped off since I had my little chat. Which means you can just go back to your rooms. When Bernice gets back, I won't tell her you didn't actually do anything.'

'No,' I say decisively, although I don't actually meet her gaze. 'I do want to help out –'

Bev laughs shortly. 'Because Bernice'll be angry if you don't?'

I decide to rise above this. "And you need help. Tell me what your biggest problem is.' Before she has a chance to speak, I add. 'Apart from me. What needs doing that you don't have time to do?'

I walk out of Bev's office carrying a high-capacity datachip that contains every mention of the Braxiatel Collection in all major media for the past four months. I've got to read this stuff and prepare a summary of how we're viewed by outsiders and what aspects of our public image need to be tackled most urgently. This is not only very

useful, it also involves watching lots of telly. Brilliant.

I don't have my own office, even though I did ask for one. My first thought is that I can easily do this in my rooms. But a great idea occurs to me. A really great idea, one to add to the list of my best ideas ever.

On my way to enact this idea, I balance out my karma – best ideas don't come from nowhere – by doing a good deed. Peter stops me, asks me about a present for his mother. After some deliberation, I direct him towards Hass's quarters. Women love flowers. Even Benny.

Having turned on the charm for a few minutes at the Estates department, I filch the key code for Braxiatel's office. They sealed it when he left, and nobody has been in there since.

When I've been to Braxiatel's study before, the door has only ever opened very slowly, as if I should consider myself honoured that it was letting me in at all. Today the door not only opens for me immediately, it also says, 'Good afternoon, Mr Kane. I hope you are in good health.'

'Er, I think so,' I reply. 'It's been a while since I had a check-up.'

'Allow me to attend to that, sir,' says the door. A drone detaches itself from a compartment just above the door and moves to my side.

I realise this is where the voice was coming from. It runs a scan over me for a few seconds and projects a small chart into the air a couple of feet away. 'As you can see, Mr Kane, you are in fine health: a fact which gives me great reassurance. May I offer you a drink?'

'Coffee?'

'Right away.' The drone goes to the little coffee-bar in the near right corner of the room and fetches a cup of coffee for me.

'Are you Braxiatel's butler?' I ask the drone.

'No, sir. Mr Braxiatel took his butler with him. I am his doorman.'

'He had a drone just to open the door for him?'

'Indeed. Although I do have many other capabilities, and may I say it is a delight to have an opportunity to use them.'

I take a look around. Braxiatel was notorious for rearranging the layout of this room and tweaking the decor, probably to put visitors at a disadvantage by making it slightly unfamiliar to them. Right now it does look more or less as I remember it, with walls of inlaid marble and stone flagging across the floor. However, the mahogany writing desk is on the left as you walk in, whereas I remember it being in the middle near the rear wall. On the right is the coffee-bar and a water-cooler. The ceiling is high and has a painting of clouds and cherubs and maidens across it which is a reproduction of the Something of Venus (I can't remember, begins with an S), which I find a bit horrid and might paint over just to spite Braxiatel. There are art-deco

standard lamps on either side of the room and the window on the opposite side is tall, making the room nice and airy.

What I really love about this study, though, is the two-level effect which must also be a new addition, otherwise I'd have remembered it: halfway across the room are three little steps which take you down to a more informal area featuring a three-piece suite, with the sofa just under the window, and a coffee table. The walls are lined with bookcases, the bookcases stuffed with smart hardbacks.

After all that Braxiatel put me through. I think that the nicest office in the Collection is the very least he owes me.

The first thing I do is sit at the desk. There's a small sign on it reading Custodian of the Library of St John the Beheaded, which appears to be carved from wood but when I pick it up I find controls on the underside that regulate the appearance. It s easy enough to reprogram it: the surface shimmers and it now reads Jason Kane, esq. Then I rifle through the drawers. It would amuse me no end to find that Braxiatel used to keep a couple of porn mags in here for emergencies, but no such luck – if he had any, he took them with him (fair enough – I'd have done the same).

In fact, there really isn't much in here. I do find a very nice silver fountain pen which bears the monogram 'T.V.G.' and pick ft up, saying 'Yoink!' as I do so.

'Sir?' says the drone. 'What is the significance of "Yoink"?'

'It's an ancient ceremonial word to signify the passing of a piece of property from one person to another'

'I will add it to my vocabulary. Do you require anything else, Mr Kane?'

'Is there a monitor anywhere around?'

'I can set one up for you. Where would you like it?'

I glance around the room. 'On the coffee table, please.'

While the drone goes about its business, I turn the pen over in my hands and open it up. You can twist the top to draw all the ink from the nib and use it as a dry scratchpad-pen – which is handy, because I haven't used an ink-pen in years. 'Sorry T.V.G., but according to the Finders Keepers Code this pen is now legally mine.'

There's a foolscap scratchpad in the next drawer down, and I take these and a cup of coffee over to the sofa. I settle down, connect my datastore to the monitor, twist the top of the pen and start to make notes.

An hour later and I've got about thirty pages of notes stored in the scratchpad. This is easy. The reason Bev hasn't been able to do this is that she doesn't know how to skim or channel-surf. We don't need acres of detail for this thing, we need a broad overview of how we

seem to the half-attentive, semi-interested man in the street.

There a couple of mentions of PR disasters, but mostly it's stuff about the Draconians and the Mim. The Collection appears on a lot of maps of disputed territory on the news channels.

I'm doing so well, I deserve another coffee. I decide to get it myself rather than asking the drone. Stretch my legs.

On the way back from the coffee-bar I walk down the steps, and it's only then that I notice what's amiss. I walk back up them to be sure.

One, two, three… four, five. Five steps. There were three before. I walk down them again. One, two, three, four, five…

Six?

Have I forgotten how to count?

Or walk?

I'll sit down and consider this whilst drinking my coffee, and so I walk to the sofa. I walk. I keep walking. However, the sofa seems, if anything, to be getting further away. I walk more quickly, and more quickly still, and the coffee starts to spill over and burn my hand.

Eventually I reach the sofa and sit far too quickly, ending up with a half-full cup of coffee and a half-scalded hand.

I look around the study. The steps to the other level are now at least fifty feet away, probably further. And there are clearly more than six steps now.

'Er…?' I say.

'Sir?' The voice of the drone comes from the other end of the study.

The echo prompts me to look up and I note that the ceiling also seems to be higher. The drone zooms across the room, which takes several seconds. It arrives, drops to the floor, an arm extends from its underside and starts to clean up the coffee I've spilled.

'What's going on?' I ask.

'The volume of the study has expanded by a factor of thirty-two point seven six three, sir,' it says, still mopping.

'Yes. I see that. Maybe not with quite such pinpoint accuracy, but yes. Any particular reason why?'

'I assumed that you had done it, sir.'

'Ah. I assumed *you* had. Did Braxiatel ever do this?'

'Mr Braxiatel frequently modified the dimensions. Although not usually to such a great extent.'

I don't see how this is possible, but since this is Braxiatel we're talking about, impossible stuff is par for the course, 'I see.' I tell the drone. 'And how did he do that?'

'I do not know.'

'Handy.'

'Sorry, sir.'

'Isn't your fault. Only everybody'll blame me if I can't put this back

the way it was.'

I start to walk to the desk, hoping to find some sort of control system over there – but again, even as I walk, the steps get further away. This time when I run, the steps start to multiply, as though the vertical hold on my eyes has gone on the blink, and as I stumble up the steps they shoot away. Eventually, somehow. I clamber over the top and roll down the other side, battering my head on the stone.

I wake up again with the smell of fresh coffee in my nostrils. From bitter experience. I know better than to assume that any distressing situation I might have been in when I passed out was merely a dream: in fact. I often wake up assuming that I *am* in some kind of peril. If I then discover that I'm not, this gets the day off to a good start. Even the coffee doesn't put me under any illusions.

I'm still in Braxiatel's study, and it hasn't got any smaller whilst I was out cold.

The coffee has been fetched by the drone, which is still being very nice. I haven't forgotten that the drone used to belong to Braxiatel, and it has crossed my mind that the drone may have done all this as a parting gesture from the conniving bastard and is just being nice as cover.

Hmm.

'How long was I out?' I ask.

'You have remained in the room for the duration, sir,' replies the *drone.*

'No, no, I mean how long was I unconscious for?'

'Forty-three minutes.'

I hoist myself up and look around. The study has been busy. It's hard to tell how high the ceiling is now: I'd guess just over two hundred feet. The Venus frieze has expanded and now looks sort of like a real sky, and the giant cherubs are scaring the shit out of me as their bonny faces loom down. Around me the steps have spread at angles, placing me in the bottom of a sort of valley. I can't see the desk or the door, and the distance to the walls Is harder to judge than the height of the ceiling. The walls are lined with hundred-shelf bookcases.

'How large is the study now?' I ask the drone.

'Unknown. The journey to the coffee-bar was three point five four eight kilometres.'

'Kilometres?'

'The bar is no longer in the corner of the study. The corner appears to be moving further and further away.'

'Is the study still getting bigger?'

'Unknown. Probability: yes.'

‘How do I stop it?’

‘Unknown.’

‘Suggestions?’

‘Do the opposite of what started it.’

‘I have no idea what started it.’ I drain the coffee cup in one glug.

‘Maybe I should work on getting out before I do anything else. Which way to the door?’

The drone projects a cheerful yellow holographic arrow.

‘Thanks,’ I say, and start to clamber up the steps.

It’s three hours later, and I’m hungry.

‘How much further is it?’ I ask the drone as I walk past a standard lamp (the ninth one I’ve passed so far).

‘Unknown. The expansion of the room does not appear to be consistent, so I’m afraid I cannot estimate the distance.’

‘Is there any food in here?’

‘The coffee-bar boasts a selection of biscuits.’

‘Do you think you could find the coffee-bar again?’

‘I think so, sir. Do you wish me to go?’

‘Please. Bring all the biscuits you can carry.’

The drone shoots off, and I’m alone.

‘Hurry back,’ I call after it, probably sounding a bit pathetic. I realise that I should have asked it to get some water, too.

The drone has been gone for more than two hours. I haven’t stopped walking and this flagging is hard on your ankles – why couldn’t he have had a carpet like normal people? And I’ve got a headache. I sit on the nearest step and rest.

People must be wondering where I am.

I glance over to my left and catch sight of something: I’m not sure what it is, but anything that breaks up the stone monotony is very, very welcome.

As I get closer, I realise it’s a water-cooler and I start to run, tripping over my feet and knocking over a nearby lamp. I half expect the cooler to be a mirage and that when I reach it it will vanish, and I’m so over-eager for this not to be the case that I fling myself at it.

It’s real and I bounce off it to the hard floor. I fumble at the controls and eventually persuade the machine to dispense a cup of water. I drink it and immediately get another.

Halfway through my fifth cup, the drone returns, carrying dozens of packs of biscuits in its tractor beam. It apologises for taking so long and drops the biscuits into my lap. I seize them gratefully and try to decide which to eat first, reading the labels on the little shrink-wrapped packets.

‘Lemon and raisin?’ I exclaim, holding up one of the packets. Who

eats these?'

As it turns out, when it's ten hours since breakfast and there's nothing else around, Jason Kane eats them. There are other, nicer varieties as well, and I manage a hearty meal of biscuits.

'Do you think I'm being punished for something?' I ask the drone as it busies itself clearing up the wrappers.

'In what way, sir?'

'I don't know. Hubris. I wanted a nice big study, didn't I? This is sort of an ironic comeuppance. Braxiatel liked that sort of thing.'

'With the greatest respect, your hypothesis does not strike me as rational.'

'Well, you say that, but when I was a lad I remember wishing I could live on biscuits, and now look at me,' I reply, munching on a ginger snap.

Some hours later Biscuits all gone – or so the drone says. I don't trust him. Maybe he's keeping them to himself. Several times I try to trick him into giving himself away. Doesn't work. He's a sly one.

'Mr Kane,' says the drone, i should express my ccoonncceerrnn… rreeggaarrddiinngg… yyoouurr…'

The drone falls from the air. I just about manage to catch him.

'What's wrong?' I say, panicking. His voice sounds scary weird.

'Ppoowweerr… rruunniinngg… Ilooww…'

I suddenly feel awful. Faithful drone. Why did I suspect him? 'Don't die, poor drone!' I cry out. 'Don't die!'

'Nnoo…' he says. 'Ijuusstt nneeeedd rrreeeccchhhaaarrrgggeee…'

The life blinks out of him and I hug him close to me, weeping uncontrollably. I never even knew his name.

Then, I hear a voice. 'Jason?'

I look up and see Benny atop a stairway. She dashes down the steps and crouches next to me. 'Stop crying. What happened?'

I tell her I'm sorry for everything, and I love her, and I confess to a number of things I really should have come clean about much earlier.

She tries several times to silence me but I insist she hears it all.

Eventually she stops me.

'Jason!' she says. 'Pull yourself together. It's not Benny, it's Bev.'

I refocus my eyes and realise she's right. It is Bev.

Maybe I need to calm down a bit.

'What happened in here?' she asks. 'We've gravity waves causing all kinds of havoc out there, all emanating from here.'

'I don't know,' I say. 'I was working. Then the room just started getting bigger.'

'Why? What did you do?'

'Nothing. I was just sitting over there, making notes, and then… I've

been walking for hours, trying to get out.'

Bev looks puzzled. 'But the door's just over there. About five minutes away.'

'You mean I was nearly there?' Without waiting for her, I climb to my feet and run up the steps, carrying the drone under my arm. Bev shouts for me to wait, but I keep going. She chases after me. After a few minutes I can't keep running any more and I collapse to the floor again.

'Five minutes, you said,' I shout when she catches up with me.

'Where the bloody hell is it, then?'

'It was,' she says. 'I swear, it wasn't this far.'

'It's this room. It's trying to keep me in here. It won't let me leave.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. Maybe…' I remember what's in my pocket. 'Maybe because I stole something.'

'What?'

I find the pen and hand it to her. 'It was in the desk.'

'I remember this,' she says, examining it. 'He used to keep it on his blotter most of the time. I always meant to ask him who T.V.G. was.'

The nib is still in dry mode. She twists the top and the ink comes through again.

And, very suddenly, the study is back as it was. We're sitting right next to the door.

Bev and I look around the study, then at each other, then at the pen. A small blob of ink drips onto the floor. She twists the top again.

Nothing happens.

Then Bev stands and walks towards the door, holding the pen out in front of her. As she moves the door gets further and further away, the walls and floor stretching and distorting. She wheels around, pointing the pen in another direction, and another wall starts to recede into the distance. Then she twists the top and the room springs back into shape again.

'Bloody hell,' I say. 'All that for stealing a pen?'

'All that,' says Bev. 'for meddling with the property of a man whose toothpicks probably concealed more advanced technology than you've ever seen.' Bev hands the pen back to me. Jason,' she says slowly, as though to a naughty child. 'Put this back where you found it.'

I'm too confused to be properly annoyed by her tone, and I step to the desk, open the drawer and put the pen inside. Before I leave I walk back down to the lower level and collect my stuff. I count the steps, just to be sure.

One, two, three.

Let There Be Stars

Mark Michalowski

Hass widened his frontal scoop, took in a huge volume of hot gas, and, with a massive wave of peristalsis, sent it shuddering down his body. It erupted at the rear with a thunderous report, propelling him forwards. The air screamed around him, causing his outer membrane to flutter like a flag.

Plunging deeper into the little pocket universe he thought of as home.

'Are you sure?' sent Namiszi, halo rippling. The expense will be considerable. And there are dangers.'

'My families are not without resources,' replied Hass, slightly irritably.

This was the third time they'd had this particular conversation. Hass suspected that technician Namiszi was either trying to haggle up the price, or – now the specifications had been completely drawn up – he didn't feel capable of the job. 'And I understood that you were the foremost expert in this sort of dimensional engineering.'

Hass realised his halo had shaded into the ultraviolet, and he pulled it back to indigo, aware that if Namiszi were to take offence, there were few others he could call upon to undertake this little 'project'.

Namiszi's halo sparkled with deferential sequins of blue and green.

'It's just….' He hesitated. "Some of the gravimetric data you brought back is puzzling me.'

'So you're saying you can't do it.' Hass couldn't help but allow a shimmer of disappointment to show.

'No, no – I can do it. Once the pocket is established, the opening will be made into Yesod's atmosphere. The pocket will fill and the entrance will then be anchored to your location on this Collection. It's all quite simple. Technically.' There was a hint of yellow around the 'technically' that did nothing to inspire Hass's confidence.

'And the sky?' asked Hass. 'How will it look?'

There was a pause. 'Oh,' replied Namiszi eventually. 'I see… that will be harder.'

'But not impossible?' Hass's halo flickered a worried infrared.

'Not impossible, no.'

A wave of relief passed through his body.

He flattened himself, taking the distinctive shape of a skyshrike, allowed the thermals to lift him towards the upsurface. Of course, in

this little pocket universe – extruded from real space like pressing in on a sheet of softcoral with a digit to form a pot – there was no real upsurface: just a volume, two hundred thousand cubic kilometres in volume, of hot, swirling gas.

Namiszi had made clear the limitations of his dimensional engineering from the start.

Despite the gravity generator at the 'bottom' of the pocket, the size of Hass's hideaway made it impossible to accurately reproduce the conditions on Yesod: almost a hundred thousand kilometres of metallic hydrogen and helium, wrapped around an icy, rocky core, topped off by ten thousand kilometres of liquid and gaseous hydrogen, methane, ammonia and other trace chemicals, like some vast, broiling sludge cake. Layer after layer of gases, compressed by almost unimaginable heat and pressure, each one subtly yet distinctively different from the next. There was blurring at the boundaries – where storm fronts met, acid rains and methane snows fell constantly, danglers extracted energy from thermal differentials, and snowstormers funnelled chemicals from one layer to another, feeding on the energy they stripped out.

And there were still cavities, static vortexes and standing waves where the older combines of Yesodi grew their coral houses and farmed setiles and pneumobranchs, where waxbergs rolled and spun majestically.

Here, inside Hass's pocket universe, there was neither the energy nor the gravitational gradient to produce such layers and discontinuities and still-points – never mind the sheer mass of gas.

But it still smelled of home. And, for Hass, that was almost enough.

As he cruised higher, feeling the gravity fall away, he wondered what the occupants of the planetoid just beyond the heat-glimmering ring of the exit gateway would have said if they'd known the size of the universe that Namiszi had created for him.

They knew that Hass had his own 'quarters', where he could slip out of his encounter suit and relax. But, he hoped, none of them appreciated the true scale of it.

And now it was nearly complete, just one thing left to activate. He checked with the monitor, but it was still receiving data via the subspace link, and informed him that it would be ready in a few hours.

Hass felt a swirl of anticipation, deep inside himself. A tight vortex of halocarbons dropped past him, suddenly and unexpectedly, and plummeted downwards; with a thrill he'd almost forgotten, he pulled his wings in, forming a tight, spindle shape, and plunged after it.

Hass had been swimming and diving for a couple of hours when his

skin registered a thermal wink; the collar of metal that lined the gateway out of his pocket universe was flashing at him. He widened his scoop to take in a mass of superheated hydrogen and shot upwards: someone was ringing his doorbell.

It took Hass all of eighteen seconds to corkscrew his way through the makeshift atmosphere of his little universe and through the gate.

Another seven to pour himself, like a thick radioactive oil, into his encounter suit through the aperture at the back. The doorbell rang again as Hass's suit sealed at his back, the sphincter drawing shut with a little popping noise.

'One moment,' he called.

He made sure the inner gate to his private little world was sealed and strode – hissing, clunking, heavy – through the sterile, white antechamber towards the front door.

'Peter.'

It was half a statement, half a question. Even now, after all these months, Hass found it a struggle to differentiate between humans of the same size. Their fixity of form was contrary to his expectations, a hindrance to recognition, since they all looked much the same. No shifting surface textures, no radio halo, no thermal patterning. The cues were so subtle, so minor, that Hass had learned not to greet anyone by name until he was sure who they were.

Benny's son was standing outside Hass's front door, hands clasped behind his back, strangely formal.

'Hass,' said Peter. 'Uncle Jason said I should come here.'

'Why?' sent Hass, then realised that Peter's lack of response was because Hass had sent on low-band, not the high-band radio his translator polyp was used to receiving. He shifted up.

'Mummy's coming back today,' Peter said. 'She's been to Occsid to receive a citation.'

Peter paused and pulled a face. Hass wasn't sure how to interpret it. 'That's good,' he said, equivocating. 'Isn't it?'

'Daddy says it is. He said I should give mummy a present when she comes back.'

'That would be appropriate, I imagine,' Hass ventured.

'So I asked Uncle Jason at break-time, and he said a plant would be nice for her. Women,' Peter nodded sagely, 'love flowers.'

Ahhh…

'Something she can't kill easily,' Peter added. 'Uncle Jason says.'

'She wants a challenge? Why would she want such a thing?'

Peter pulled a face, wrinkling the top bit of his face. 'I think Uncle Jason means mummy's not very good at keeping plants alive.' Peter sounded doubtful and his nose twitched.

Hass thought he finally understood. 'She needs something hardy,

then?'

Peter nodded eagerly, although Hass had the vaguest suspicion that the boy didn't know what 'hardy' meant. Still, he was sure he'd have something for Benny – perhaps one of the new cultivars of demerantine.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' Hass said suddenly, taking a step back, remembering Peter. 'I'm forgetting… please come in.'

Despite the fact that he'd be taking the boy to the greenhouse in a few moments, Hass realised inviting someone into your home was a common courtesy here. Even if that home was only a twenty-cubic-metre box, fashioned in white plastic.

Peter stuck his head through the door and peered around, then followed Hass in. He gave a little jump as the door slid shut behind him.

'Wow,' Peter said, his eyes wide as he took in the room. 'It's very white.'

'It should be some other colour?' solicited Hass anxiously. Should he have shifted the light spectrum? Every interaction with humans brought out some new deficiency in his knowledge of them.

'White's rogue,' said Peter – and Hass began to realise that Peter's expression and tone were those of pleasant awe. A warm bubble of gas developed satisfyingly inside him.

'Rogue means good?'

Peter nodded, running his little hand over the wall. 'Everything at home's really old and dirty,' he said. His eyes rolled up in their sockets – something that Hass found simultaneously funny and nauseating. 'Mummy says that's cos it's history.'

'And you… don't like history?'

This was hard, and Hass realised what it was that he found so difficult. He knew, intellectually, that human children were mentally different to their parents. They were simpler, employed different speech modes. But they were sentient. Yesodi newlings weren't: released from their parent, they streamed, mindless and instinctive, out into the world, to survive or to die, eaten by middlings or oldlings.

Only with middling came a degree of sentience, and even that was basic.

From what Hass could gather, human young matured extremely slowly once born. As a proportion of his total lifespan, Peter should – by all measures – be capable of fending for himself and holding a full, adult conversation.

Peter shrugged: 'I like space. History's boring. Zharlotte says it's just dead stuff.' He looked up at Hass. 'Zharlotte's going to have wings.' he added, his eyes wide again. And broke out into giggles as Hass farted the bubble of gas into his suit.

‘Why is it so small?’ Peter asked as Hass gestured towards a white plastic cube that extruded itself from the wall, the perfect size for the boy to sit upon.

‘Small?’

Peter nodded, eyes taking in the whole of Hass’ antechamber.

‘Where’s your bed?’

‘Ahhh… The room… don’t need a bed.’

‘So…’ Peter’s face furrowed again. Thoughtfulness? Puzzlement? ‘Where do you sleep?’

‘I don’t sleep.”

‘Really?’ Peter’s eyes widened, ‘I wish I didn’t have to sleep. Bedtime’s down.’

Hass mentally compared ‘rogue’ with ‘down’.

‘You don’t like bedtime? I thought humans liked sleep.’

‘Sleep’s okay.’ Peter said. “But bedtime’s just down.’

Hass nodded his ‘head’. One of the first things he’d learned to do in his e-suit was to nod and shake his head and gesticulate. Humans managed to convey a remarkable amount of meaning via parsimonious body language: in the absence of radio auras, surface patterns, colours and textural morphing, they had to make do with waving their arms. All two of them.

‘So what d’you do all night?’ asked Peter. ‘Wajiwaj looks at the stars with his mum-dad’s tellingscope, but he won’t let me in case I break it. Like mummy won’t let me play with her old things.’ His face twisted comically, although Hass suspected that wasn’t the intention.

For a moment, he remembered the three sailfins that had accidentally been sucked into the pocket when Namiszi had opened the gateway into Yesod’s atmosphere. He’d been thrilled at them, and for the first couple of days had chased them around, tempting them closer with strands of wax and hydrocarbonated bubbles. But then he’d found two of them floating lifelessly, their fins shredded to ribbons, each bearing the clawmarks of the other. The third he discovered two days later, seemingly uninjured, but cold and dead.

The discoveries had upset him more than he’d expected. A little scrap of his own world had died here, amongst strangers. Broken.

The sailfins’ death had, strangely, given more purpose to his gardening work: to nurture and fashion something so solid, something rooted in the earth, in the substance of the Collection itself. Yesod plantimal life lacked that rootedness, floating free in the atmosphere, subject to whims and vagaries of air currents. There had been a fashion for growing mattmoss around the hardcoral of houseshells, but the plantimals had objected to being corralled and netted and fixed, and Hass had given up in the face of the apathy from the other Yesodi.

Suddenly, there was a shudder.

No, not quite a shudder. More a *splitting*. Like the sound of one of Yesod's vast waxbergs cleaving away.

Lights began to flash around the gate entrance to his pocket universe, and the monitor radioed a 'containment breach' message to him.

'What's that?' asked Peter, taking a nervous step back.

There was another of those dreadful tearing sounds – but this time from behind the child. Peter instinctively turned, an action that saved his life.

Hass saw the air twist: a conical section of space corkscrewed, as though wrenched and wrung out by invisible hands. It stretched from just in front of Peter, over his shoulder and into the main door. As the sound cut out abruptly, both Hass and Peter could see that a two-metre section of the main door was warped, spiralled out of shape.

More warning lights began to flash – this time on a panel at the side of the entrance to Hass's home.

Gravity waves, thought Hass. But there was nothing he knew of on the Collection that could be causing them. Nothing except…

It's my universe, he realised in horror. *I've done this.*

'Peter,' said Hass. 'Come here.' The human looked at him with wide, almost tearful eyes, but didn't move.

'Peter,' Hass repeated, trying to keep his voice calm. The child probably didn't understand what was happening. Hass knew from observing Benny's interactions with her son that there were two stages to eliciting his compliance: pleasant firmness and –

'Now, Peter!' Hass bellowed.

The boy ran, falteringly, towards Hass, stopping just a couple of feet away. He looked up at what must have been a terrifying sight: a huge, metal-jointed man with a glass face, gloved hands reaching out for him.

The monitor radioed a warning about gas leakage from the pocket.

Hass saw Peter's nose wrinkle: more sensitive than a human nose, courtesy of his Killoran ancestry, able to smell the complex hydrocarbons and methane, now seeping invisibly through the gate.

Unfortunately, to the best of Hass's knowledge. Peter's ancestry didn't endow an immunity to their toxic effects.

'What's that?' asked Peter, seemingly forgetting, for a moment, the giant towering above him. That smell…'

That's my home. Hass sent, fully aware that Peter couldn't hear – or see – the radio halo that shimmered around him. Pink and purple and gold, dotted with tiny white starbursts of panic. *And it's going to kill you.*

Peter coughed, raising his hairy little hand to his mouth.

Emergency! Hass sent to the monitor, knowing that it would

translate his radio message and broadcast it to the rest of the Collection. *Peter is in my quarters. There has been* a… What could he say? Nothing short of the truth would suffice as an explanation.

There would be an inquiry. His home would be closed down. He would be sent back – back to Yesod.

Hass steeled himself. *There has been a breach*, he sent. *Toxic gases are leaking into my quarters.*

He tried to get the main door to open again, but the vast whorl of twisted metal had – to use one of Benny's favourite expressions – buggered it.

'Hass…,' moaned Peter, coughing again. Hass looked back at the pocket's entrance. At such low concentrations the leak was invisible, but no less deadly. The monitor warned him the temperature was rising. *Oh Benny*, he moaned to himself. *I'm so sorry.*

'What… what is it?' croaked Peter – and Hass looked down to see that the boy was clinging to one of his huge legs. It's gas,' Hass answered, 'It's poisonous to you.'

Peter looked up. His face red, his eyes streaming.

'What about you?'

'Me?' What a strange thing for the boy to think about at such a time.

'I'm safe in my encounter suit' Hass reassured him. A thought occurred to him, and he glanced over at the locker where his secondary e-suit was stored; but even as he watched, the whole wall bent and buckled, twisted out of shape by whatever forces his pocket universe had called into being.

Another five seconds and he could have saved the boy.

Peter pointed at Hass. 'Can't I get in there with –' He broke off with a coughing fit. The air above Hass's head twisted as another gravity wave wrenched the space around them, putting a strange, spiked dent in the door of the gate.

Of course Peter couldn't get in there with him –

Hass's train of thought stopped abruptly.

No, Peter couldn't get in with him, but….

'Peter,' Hass said, effortlessly plucking the child up into the air. His eyes were wide with fear again. 'I'm going to do something now that might scare you, but it will allow you to live. For a while.'

'Wh-what?'

Hass set Peter back down on the ground. Another dimensional tear and the gate could be slashed open completely: the atmosphere in the pocket would rush in and the temperature and the pressure would kill Peter instantly, well before the toxicity of the gases did the job.

He took three paces to the environmental control system, began to send.

This would hurt, Hass thought. This would hurt a lot. It might even kill him. But if one of them had to die in order for one to survive….

This was his fault, not Peter's. And how could he ever look Benny in the eye, ever hope to make a home here again, if Peter died? Yesodi might hunt their offspring to strengthen the gene pool, but humans didn't work like that.

And Hass had chosen – *chosen* – to come here and work amongst humans. He had to live by their codes.

'Peter,' said Hass firmly. 'I want you to take a very deep breath – from here.' He indicated an air grille by the front door that was currently pumping out as much standard air as it could.

Peter did as he was told and Hass took a step back towards the gate, instructing the e-suit's sphincter to open. With a slushy pop – and a warning from the monitor about the danger – it irised open, releasing a thin stream of Hass' own air into the chamber. Hass saw how Peter felt the wash of heat and turned, clearly scared. It couldn't be helped.

As quickly as he could, Hass poured himself out of the sphincter into the chamber.

The pain was not as bad as Hass had expected. He'd thickened his outer membranes as much as possible – but that meant his ductability was severely reduced. His skin felt cold and numb, and as he flexed, moving across to the other side of the chamber to minimise the damage to Peter from his own heat and radioactivity, he felt his outer layers turning from their normal iridescent orange-red to a pale cream, matt and dead. They flaked and fell to the floor. Thin, waxy scales.

'Peter,' Hass said, thankful that he'd remembered to move his translator polyp deep inside his body. Climb into the suit at the – *ahhhh* – back.'

Now came the pain. As the intense cold of the chamber began to sink deeper into his flesh, he felt it. Knives, cutting and gouging. He could hardly see, the dead and opaque membranes over his optical trenches obscuring everything. Slowly and painfully. Hass extruded a pseudopod and wiped them clear.

Hass sent to the suit, instructing it – once Peter had clambered inside through the sphincter at the back – to manoeuvre close to the air grille. He watched the boy, trying hard not to slip, hoisting himself up into the hole. Then suddenly he was gone, tumbling about inside the confines of the vast mechanical device. The suit moved smoothly into action, backing itself against the grille, venting the stored Yesodi gases and taking on breathable air for the boy.

Seal, sent Hass, once again almost blinded. He tried to move towards the suit, but the base of his form was almost stuck, as if glued to the floor.

And then Hass felt, rather than saw, the air around them warp and shimmer and a huge circle of light fell out of the world as the gate buckled and gave way.

They flew.

Rising and dipping in the thermals, the two of them flew. Hass's body ached; his skin tingled uncomfortably, but the streaming hot gas soothed it. He grasped Peter's hand in a dull orange loop of flesh and guided him upwards, catching the currents and soaring high amongst the clouds: and then, to the delighted whoops of the boy in the e-suit, they dropped through streamers of brown and yellow gas.

They spiralled around clumps of waxy methane, speckled and sparkled with ammonia salts like icebergs. Peter alternately cheering and falling into stunned silence at the spectacle around him.

Zharlotte's going to have wings, Peter had said. *But I bet she'll never fly in space,* thought Hass; and for the briefest of moments he felt a twinge of sadness. What must it be like for humans, in their fragile little bodies, groundbound and staring up at a sky in which they'd never fly? Could they ever miss something they'd never had?

How tiny their world must be.

He glanced at Peter, his wide, grinning face visible through the faceplate. Hass heard him hoot as a sleet of ammonia ice rained past them, glittering in the light of the take sun, high above them.

'This is rogue!' Peter gasped breathlessly. Inside the much-too-big-for-him suit, he turned to see Hass through the faceplate.

'I won't be able to tell anyone about this, will I?' he said. His voice was suddenly adult-serious. 'It might not be your fault.' he added.

'Even so, I cannot hide this now. They'll make me close it down,'

Hass replied. 'Which might be a good thing.'

'Uh-huh!' Peter was shaking his head. 'They can't. That's not fair.'

Hass didn't know what to say: he was saved from having to say anything by a radio pulse tickling his skin.

Data capture complete, the monitor sent to him. *Projection ready.*

Activate on my command, Hass sent back, gripping the hand of the e-suit more firmly. Then he spread his body wide, a huge living parachute, and caught a rising vortex of warm hydrogen – and the two of them were catapulted upwards, through ever-thinning layers of gas, and the universe darkened around them.

The Yesodi gazed up into the velvety blackness.

'Watch,' Hass said to Peter, pulling him close and directing his attention towards the heavens, 'I imagine Wajiwaj has never seen this.' He glanced sideways and saw Peter's wide, brown eyes raised to the sky. Even if Bev closed down his little pocket universe, the look on Peter's face somehow made it all worth it. He followed Peter's eyes

upwards.

Activate.

Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were coming out.

Sleeptalking

John Fletcher

When he woke that morning. Verso was there, looking at him. As she had been every morning for over two weeks now.

'You slept well,' she said.

Parasiel smiled, 'I was tired.'

'Can't imagine why,' she replied, then caught his eye and giggled.

As he dressed, she continued watching. 'I like the way you don't have fur,' she said. All that smooth skin, it's so shiny and bright.'

He glanced at her, 'Not necessarily the peak of evolution, though. It's why we're so fond of clothes.'

Verso laughed again, snatching at his shirt tails. I like you more without them. Besides, your evolution primes you to circumvent weakness; hence clothes.' She smiled, reaching around to slip her hand down over his chest. 'So you can stay shiny.'

'Ah,' he gasped. 'But that's not really proper evolution is it? It's more instinct. Birds line their nest with feathers to stay warm.'

Verso withdrew her hand, and when he turned around, she was pouting at him. It was her disappointed face. 'Not everything has to be an academic discussion. There's no point in being an individual if all you're going to talk about are the same things.'

'I didn't mean to –'

She fixed him with a stern look. 'I want to have some fun today.'

'I need to do some studying. My paper on –'

'Fun,' she said.

He looked at her then. She sat down, naked, curled up in the corner chair. A long strand of hair falling across her right eye. So vulnerable.

So open. So unlike anyone he'd ever met.

'All right,' Parasiel said. The sky outside was grey, clouds promising April showers. He considered their options, then said, 'Has anyone shown you the Deep Galleries yet?'

As celestial objects went, KS-159 wasn't that big. At a vigorous pace, you could circle the whole planetoid on foot in an hour and a half.

Parasiel had always just assumed there were gravity generators and atmospheric systems and that kind of technical thing at work to make the place fit for study.

KS-159 wasn't that big. But it was big enough.

One of Braxiatel's pet projects a couple of years back had been a folly. Not some pseud's neo-classical structure, but a more

contemporary interpretation. Taking advantage of its compact size, he'd instructed the creation of a lift shaft to travel from one side of the planetoid to the other.

Six weeks after starting work, the construction crew had been called off. Braxiatel had changed his mind.

'They were running the suspensor fields as they went; Parasiel explained, 'So when the order came, they spent a couple of hours rigging up a gravity net at the bottom and left the viewing car in place.'

They were walking through the rear of the library. Verso was holding his hand, bouncing up and down in excitement.

'So what's at the bottom?'

'The Deep Galleries,' he whispered. 'Most of the planetoid's natural honeycomb became the stacks.'

'The clan knows there are bad things in the stacks,' Verso said.

'Rubric saw that room come to life and –'

'Yeah, stuff like that happens round here,' Parasiel said. 'Anyway, the Deep Galleries are like the stacks, but before they were converted.'

Verso stopped and looked at him, 'Well, obviously. You wouldn't drill a lift shaft through a store of your own belongings.'

'Fair point,' Parasiel conceded. 'They're sometimes used for exhibits, like fungal sculptures, that kind of thing, but mostly it's just potholers and student raves.' He nodded towards a set of glass doors.

'Over there.'

As they neared, he could see someone waiting in the shadows. The chequered face of Bifolium staring at him. Waiting for the lift.

'Arse,' Parasiel muttered.

There was a tug on his hand. Verso, her head turned to the left.

'What's wrong with that picture?'

He looked to see what she was asking about. A blurred montage of blue, green and red dots. He laughed, 'It's an old Earth trick to do with depth perception. If you stare at it long enough, you see a three-dimensional shape.'

'Why not use a hologrammatic depth generator?'

'It's an *old* trick.'

'Ah,' Verso nodded.

The lift doors pinged. Bifolium stepped out of the shadows. Verso smiled, 'Good morning, Bifolium.'

'Verso,' he nodded. 'This is your new clan.'

Oh god. Parasiel hated the protective father scene. In fact, he tried to avoid in-laws in general; it had been years since he'd been able to stomach just being 'nice', especially with the old and blinkered.

Verso saved him from having to find an answer.

‘Different perspectives are important, Bifolium,’ she said. ‘You know that.’ She tapped her face, just under her left eye socket. ‘The clan sees with different eyes now, that is all. Collection eyes, not clan eyes. We fit in. It is interesting.’

Bifolium stepped into the waiting lift. Parasiel had a sudden urge to call off their visit. It was irrational, he knew, but something about Bifolium always put him on edge; probably just some psychological reaction to the skin colouring. The light and the dark.

He stepped into the lift, Verso next to him, but her head still craned backwards towards the painting. ‘I still can’t see it,’ she said.

Parasiel looked at Bifolium, ‘All the way down?’

Bifolium nodded, and Parasiel pressed the button.

‘Oh!’ Verso exclaimed, pure childish glee. ‘It’s a horse!’

She took a step towards the painting. And the doors closed after her. Before Parasiel could touch the controls, the lift started to descend. On the other side of the lift doors, Verso shrugged apologetically, and then was gone.

Parasiel looked at the passing rockface for a moment, then down at his feet. The lift was sheathed in glass, and through the floor he could see the suspensor points disappearing into darkness.

Attempting to build as much sarcasm into his voice as possible, Parasiel opted to do ‘nice’, just until they reached bottom.

‘So,’ he turned to Bifolium. ‘Are you interested in fungal sculpture?’

Before Bifolium could respond, the lights went out. A second later the lift began to fall.

‘Buggering arse on a stick,’ Parasiel moaned. ‘What happened?’

The elevator lights remained dark, the only illumination the red glow of suspensor fields running down the shaft. Parasiel knew this, because his face had come to rest on the floor providing him with a particularly good view. The sudden stop had also left him with a bloody nose.

Bifolium was sat in the corner, his robe folded neatly around him.

‘The planetoid has experienced some sort of gravitational shift. Probably a wave front triggered by a dimensional abnormality.’

The voice was expressionless.

‘And how do you know that?’ Parasiel rolled over, looked at his companion.

Bifolium smiled, raising one hand, finger extended to point to a silver star in his patchwork face. His left eye.

‘Broad spectrum today, is it?’ Parasiel said.

Bifolium smiled. ‘The wave front was not something we expected to see.’

Parasiel was checking his limbs for further injuries. ‘Is that the

Quire or just a “royal we”?’ he muttered.

There was no answer. Bifolium was looking back up the shaft. After a moment, he turned back to Parasiel. ‘The clan is sleeping,’ he said.

Then he looked down at the floor. ‘Not everything sleeps.’

Parasiel made a mental note to forget about ‘nice’ again, and dialled the sarcasm up a notch instead. ‘Right,’ he nodded. ‘Good to know. Thanks.’

He tried the emergency comms panel, but nothing was working.

Parasiel wasn’t surprised. He was thinking about the previous times he’d come to the galleries. There had been a green glow to accompany the red of the suspension points those times; which probably meant that in normal conditions, the lift generated its own acceleration and braking fields, playing off the suspensors. The absence of that green light meant they’d probably lost all power in the capsule itself.

There must have been a redundancy in the safety systems of the suspension points, something to halt their fall. All they needed now was rescue.

Parasiel tugged at his collar, glanced back up the shaft.

‘How far did we fall, do you think?’

There was no answer.

Bifolium remained hunched in his corner, his head down, not moving.

‘Are you all right?’ Parasiel asked.

Nothing.

‘Bifolium? Are you all right?’ Parasiel repeated, suddenly panicked by the lack of response.

Slowly Bifolium looked up. His mouth opened silently, his eyes pleading. Then he reached up with one hand, fingers outstretched.

Parasiel’s hands stayed in their pockets, fighting the instinct to respond. Why the sudden need for affection? There were only two of them in here, respecting personal space should have been easy enough. That desperate hand routine was just creepy. What did he expect Parasiel to *do?*

And then he remembered. Verso telling him about Bifolium – *he’s a joker* – and his newfound fascination with the human habit of shaking hands and running an electrical discharge down his fingers when he did it.

Parasiel wedged his hands a bit further into his pockets and half-turned away. ‘You must be joking,’ he muttered.

Help me.

Bifolium’s face broke with relief.

‘I cannot abide sleeping,’ Bifolium whispered. ‘It is so lonely.’

Parasiel frowned, wondering whether the translation algorithms

were misfiring again. They often struggled with metaphor.

The next sentence made it clear.

'So cold in the darkness.'

Parasiel watched Bifolium as his head slowly surveyed the capsule.

The faint lines of the titanium frame; the sheen of the glass panels comprising the walls; the dull light of the suspension points that illuminated nothing and just drained away colour.

A tear ran down Bifolium's face.

Why was this happening to him? Why had Verso left him trapped with this joker? Because, Parasiel thought, a claustrophobic would bloody well need to be a joker to jump on a lift down to the only really enclosed space on the Collection.

He looked at that tear, trying to summon 'nice' and recall his psychology courses, to work out what to say. He squatted down near Bifolium, tentatively reached out his own hand.

'You're, er, you're not alone,' he managed.

Bifolium looked at him, then slowly broke into laughter. Joker.

Parasiel snatched his hand away. He swore and, as Bifolium carried on laughing, kicked at one of the glass panels.

The laughter cut off immediately.

'What did you do that for?' Bifolium snapped.

Parasiel swung towards him. 'There are times,' he said, 'when it's really not funny to take the piss. The rest of you have got the idea, Verso understands, why don't you?'

'The clan,' Bifolium stated, 'is sleeping.'

I'm so lonely. Won't you help me?

Parasiel snatched away, scratched at his temple. An itch you could never reach. He took a deep breath, forcing his hand back down to his side. 'Verso's never mentioned telepathy,' he said, 'but I can think of better ways to reveal that ability than playing stupid tricks on me.'

There was silence. Parasiel tried to focus on the rock through the glass, pick out some veins of ore, make a stab at the planetoid's geological composition. Anything to take his mind off the stupid arse he'd got landed with. All he could see was his own blood red reflection, Bifolium curled in the corner behind him.

Parasiel couldn't bring himself to turn back to his companion yet again, so settled for fixing his reflection with a direct look. 'Couldn't you be reaching out to someone else? Remind them we're down here? See how the rescue's going? That kind of thing?'

'I am not telepathic,' Bifolium answered.

'Don't treat me like a child,' Parasiel snapped. 'Because my patience is really starting to run low.'

'Careful,' Bifolium said. 'The veneer you have spent so long constructing over your true self is beginning to tarnish.' He paused,

frowned. ‘Have I understood metaphor correctly?’

‘The use of metaphor was lovely,’ Parasiel replied, his temper showing in quavering bluster. ‘Just a pity what you were saying was bullshit.’

‘Our families define us, Parasiel.’

And with that Bifolium adjusted his robe, and his head dropped, his body curling tighter. Conversation over.

Whatever had disabled the lift also severed the link between Parasiel’s watch and the Collection’s central clock. Which meant he had no way of knowing how long they’d been stuck in the lift. But his back was aching from being wedged into the corner opposite Bifolium and it was starting to get stuffy.

So lonely.

Parasiel sighed – that was so *childish* – looked at Bifolium, but the Quire hadn’t moved. There was no reason he should – that was the point of telepathy – but all the people with psi ability Parasiel had encountered still held residual cues of bodily communication. A flick of the eyes, a nod of the head, the hint of a smile.

From Bifolium there was nothing.

Won’t you help me?

‘Could you please stop it?’ Parasiel asked. ‘If you are claustrophobic, I can appreciate this isn’t a great deal of fun for you. But silly telepathy isn’t going to help.’

Bifolium spoke, but remained curled up. ‘I am not responsible for the whispers,’ he said. ‘But I hear them.’

‘What?’ Parasiel replied.

‘The whispers in the dark. I hear them as you hear them.’ His head unfolded from the robe, looked directly at Parasiel. The thing you are afraid of. The thing you have always been afraid of.’

Whispers in the dark.

‘What has Verso told you?’ Parasiel said dumbly.

Bifolium tilted his head, the silver of his eye glinting in shadow.

‘Our families define us, Parasiel, and with Verso the clan is complete. Does she complete you?’

‘Yes.’

His answer was sudden, automatic. A surprise to him.

Bifolium closed his eyes. ‘Tell me,’ he said.

‘She likes me,’ Parasiel replied. ‘She likes me. Not the person I’m a bit like, or the person she wants me to be, but me. Who I am now.’

A faint smile crossed Bifolium’s face. ‘So like Verso,’ he whispered.

‘Always the kind one, always the one to find the common ground. Always interested in the others. A welcome perspective.’

‘I think so,’ Parasiel agreed.

The eyes opened again. ‘But she is not your dreams. She is not what you remember, what drives you on.’

‘How would you know?’ Parasiel snapped.

‘Any object can be viewed from any number of perspectives. All of them will reveal something different about it. And now Verso has her view on things and I have mine.’ He leaned forward.

Parasiel could see beads of sweat caught in the light fur on his forehead; one breaking free, tracing a line across brown and pink skin. Bifolium’s tongue flicked out to catch it as it reached the corner of his mouth. The silver eye shifted in its socket. There was a hard line to Bifolium’s shoulders, his muscles tense, tendons rigid in his forearms.

‘I’ve seen you,’ Bifolium said. There was something manic in that voice, just below the surface, straining to break free. ‘We define your shape in the clanscape. It’s visible in what you do, where you go, what you say, what you touch, everything you look at. And the shape that you are defines your past, and your family defines you.’

Help me. I’m so lonely. I want to be free.

Parasiel should have been afraid. Stuck in a lift with the crazy-in-law and an emergency braking field the only thing between him and a half-mile fall. But there was something in what Bifolium said.

Hinting at something beyond what he could know, a way of seeing beyond his perception. Almost like seduction, drawing him in.

Something deeper. He knew the sensation.

He felt it every time he made love with Verso.

Help me.

Bifolium raised his hand, began scratching at his temple. ‘What is it?’ he hissed. ‘What are they?’

Help me.

‘I don’t know,’ Parasiel lied.

Help me.

‘Go away,’ Bifolium whispered.

I’m lonely.

‘Go away!’ It was a roar, filling the lift. Bifolium leapt to his feet, head jumping around, looking for something. ‘Go away! I’m trying to sleep! We’re all trying to sleep!’

Lonely.

‘Shut up!’ He punched the wall. Parasiel pulled himself to his feet, looking at Bifolium. The tension seeping through him. The mania that had underwritten the voice just one minute ago now breaking loose.

‘I have to be free!’ He punched again and again. ‘Free!’ he repeated, over and over, punctuating each word with a blow.

Parasiel reached out a hand towards him, stopped himself before he made contact.

‘Bifolium,’ he said, his voice shaking. ‘Bifolium,’ he repeated, ‘please

stop.'

There was a crack and a thick line shot through the glass pane.

'Bifolium!' Parasiel screamed, his eyes brimming with fear.

And Bifolium stopped. Turned to his companion and smiled. 'I have to get out of here,' he explained. 'Do you see? I'm trying to sleep, but it's too loud down here.' He looked up the shaft again. The rage was seeping from his body, his voice descending into a whimper. 'It's too dark.'

He ran his fingers along the crack in the pane, then slowly sank back down to the floor.

Parasiel opened the comms panel again, pressed the emergency button. There was still no response. He rested his head on the panel, breathing into the dead microphone. 'Help us. Please, help us.'

In the minutes that followed, Parasiel began to realise his mistake.

He'd thought Bifolium had claustrophobia, then that he'd been playing a joke. It was only now the pendulum was swinging back again that he could see it clearly. Not claustrophobia, but culture shock.

It was common enough among expeditions to the deep worlds.

Alien environments, ways of living, the wrong sensations. Not everyone could handle it. Parasiel had supposed just because the Quire were evolved, it wouldn't apply. Somehow they'd be better than that.

The key was providing hints of the familiar, enough to trigger comfort reactions in the brain.

Parasiel's problem was that he was stuck in a lift with a sufferer whose home was millennia distant with no way of providing those physical triggers. So he did the best he could.

He talked about Verso.

He told Bifolium about the first time he saw her, talking to Benny Summerfield at that reception. When the door had broken and Brax's temporal shadow charged in, he hadn't taken his eyes off her. There was something about her, something about all of the Quire that just seemed… deeper. And he'd quickly realised it was something he wanted to be lost in.

Alluring, drawing him in.

It wasn't until that night, when he'd ended up walking her back to the Marble Courtyard, that he'd understood there was more to her than that. She'd barely been conscious at the start, but within minutes she seemed to have… not sobered, but come alive. This was no futuristic siren calling him onto the rocks. Because she'd laughed, and pinched him, and she'd been fun and she'd been funny.

When they'd reached the door to the Quire's apartment, she'd

stumbled, spun round and, as he caught her, she had run her hand down his cheek. Told him he was very handsome.

He'd asked if he could see her again, and she'd giggled and said yes.

The next few times they'd met had been different. She was still open to him, her eyes drinking every detail of him, but a step reserved.

'But that's vodka for you,' Parasiel commented.

The Collection had a good grapevine. When he'd heard of the argument between Tarrant and Bifolium, and her ultimatum to Dorso, he'd worried. He'd spent the best part of the night standing in the Marble Courtyard, pacing and staring at the lights on in their windows, the shadows playing across them. Hoping they weren't going to leave.

And they didn't.

And when they'd met next, Verso had laughed and smiled, and she touched his hair, and they'd talked. Like all the Quire, so much easier so suddenly. They talked about archaeology and morality and the places Parasiel had been. She didn't say much about their study beyond its name, and when he tried to get her to talk about the clanscape, she just laughed and told him it couldn't be explained. It had to be seen.

Bifolium laughed then, and Parasiel could see life returning to his eyes. Knew he'd done the right thing.

'Our families define us,' Bifolium said. Previously it had sounded like a challenge, but now it was a simple statement of fact. A pleasantry like *nice weather we're having.*

There was a pause.

'My parents are religious,' Parasiel said quietly. 'I think… I think I'd come to hate them for that. I shouldn't, I know, but… It's not like believing in a deity automatically makes you stupid or superstitious or something. Because… that's not them.'

So lonely.

'Take that away, and they're smart people, and kind people. We had a ranch, out in the steppes past Kindra City. A half-hour speeder ride to the nearest church, but we went every Monday.

'When I was young, you would be separated from the others for service. Go to a side room, where there was picture of the angel on the wall above you, keeping you safe in his wings. And they'd tell us stories from the Way.

'And when you look at it, it's not an especially clever or original mythology. The central text is the battle over creation, between the angels and the Satan, back when the world was young.'

Help me.

'The world…' He paused, swallowed deep. The world was young back then, still not fully formed. That was why the Satan wanted it. To

shape it to his will.' Parasiel looked at Bifolium then, smiled. 'He lost, of course. The last act of the battle saw the angel drive a sword through the Satan's heart, and he fell, dying.

'But in his dying breath, all of his plans, all of his evil escaped from his lungs and was caught by the winds. Scattered across the world, his words and deeds took refuge, hiding in every nook and crack and shadow they could find.

'The Way tells us that if you breathe deep of shadow, the Satan will be waiting.' Parasiel shook his head, 'Like I said, it's not exactly a stand-out mythology, is it?'

Even before he said it, Parasiel knew what Bifolium was going to ask. Had known it from the moment he started to tell his tale.

'When did you breathe the shadow, Parasiel?'

Parasiel swallowed, his jaw tight.

'When I was seven. We were out playing in the fields, a game of catch. I was running for the ball, and something tripped me, and I fell. I was lost in the long grasses, and no one could see me. And only I could see what had tripped me.

'It was a crack in the earth. It had been a hot summer, and the ground had just dried out. But I couldn't help myself, I was curious, because it was so dark. So I looked and there was a smell coming from it and I looked and…'

Help me. I'm so lonely.

'It was just a stupid story. And I knew then I had to rationalise it.'

He paused, shrugged. 'That's when I became an academic.'

Bifolium laughed. Parasiel looked up, hot tears on his cheeks, suddenly angry. 'What? What's so funny?'

'Academia is a matter of perspective.'

'So?'

Bifolium turned his face one way, then another. Parasiel's eyes must have adjusted to the light. Because whereas before, he could only see an anonymous smear of skin tones, now there was definition. There was no even distribution of colour, but one side was predominantly pink, the other brown.

'There is always a different side to be explored,' Bifolium said.

Please. Help me. I'm so lonely.

'You are frightened. Of falling.' His eyes locked on Parasiel's. 'You're frightened of the voices.'

There was deep bass sound then, a solitary heartbeat that reverberated down the shaft Parasiel flinched, looked up, then down.

He wasn't sure, but he thought in the distance one of the suspensor points had switched off, swallowed by darkness.

Help me.

'You looked into the shadow in the earth,' Bifolium continued, 'and

you caught that smell. A sulphur, or some other gaseous build-up given freedom. And you thought it was the Satan's breath.'

'Shut up,' Parasiel said.

Another thunk, another heartbeat. And this time Parasiel saw it, the light of the suspensor blink out

'And then, that night at home, you thought about those stories. What the Way told you. Lying in your bed, you hoped those wings would enfold and protect you. A mother's embrace.'

Lonely.

The heartbeat again, closer as the darkness took another step up the shaft.

'Only your mother never came, nor your father. You watched the light under your door, waiting for them to make you safe. Only they never knew about you, never saw your fall, because of the long grass. You were hidden from sight'

The deep bass echoes reverberated up the shaft, shaking the capsule. Increasing in speed. Lights blinking out below them.

'So they never came. They walked straight past your door and on to their own.'

'Stop it,' Parasiel begged. He looked up, the same progression, lights blinking out. Their illumination all but gone. There were only three points left above and below.

Help me.

'They turned out the light. And that's when you heard them. That's when you heard the whispers.'

Two points.

'Stop it!' Parasiel cried.

One.

'The Satan's breath.'

So lonely.

The lift was plunged into darkness. There was a jolt as it dropped, Parasiel screamed, and then jerked against the floor as the lights came back on.

All of the lights. The suspensor points, the braking fields, the strip bulbs in the capsule. His watch blinked the time at him.

Then the lift started to climb.

'The whispers,' Bifolium said, 'were just the wind through the grasses outside.' He shrugged, 'It probably took you a few hours to work it out. A few more the next day to look in a book and find out about sulphur. And that's when you started pushing, because you didn't want to believe in the Way any more. You wanted your own path, of fact and certainty. To justify your parents' rejection of you, to justify your rejection of them.'

'Bloody shit,' Parasiel breathed. His hands were shaking. It's shit.'

‘It’s why all your academic papers favour views of ambiguity, disputing theories rather than declaring your own. Because you haven’t found your perspective yet. That’s what you think Verso gives you. She will never reject you. She gives you the courage to explore, to find your own way. To believe.’

Parasiel looked up, looked at Bifolium, serene on the other side of the capsule. The crack in the glass behind him in line with his spine, bisecting his body.

‘I love her,’ Parasiel said.

‘But of course,’ Bifolium nodded. ‘It’s a nice story.’

‘The voices, in my head,’ Parasiel asked as the doors opened, ‘what were they?’

‘I heard them too.’ Bifolium shrugged. I do not have enough data for an answer. The clanscape is unfinished, your Collection full of ambiguities.’

And then Verso was on him, wrapped her arms around him as others looked on. A team of Killoran engineers stood nearby with a portable generator, cables feeding into the shaft.

‘Sorry if we scared you,’ one said. ‘We had to reboot the system to get things moving. Would have warned you, but comms are still down.’

Parasiel waved them away, kissed Verso on the forehead. ‘Did you miss me?’

‘Oh, yes,’ she replied. ‘We were all very worried. But me especially.’

Parasiel slipped his hand into hers, gave her a squeeze. ‘You didn’t hear the voices up here?’

Verso frowned. ‘No. What voices?’

‘Just voices,’ Parasiel said. ‘I couldn’t figure out where they were coming from, that’s all.’

‘Bifolium is a joker,’ she replied.

Parasiel turned to his temporary companion. Bifolium reached out to touch Verso’s face. In the moment that he did, the last of his tension seemed to drain away. Verso looked at him with big sympathetic eyes, then with a hint of sadness, pushed his hand away.

‘Be strong,’ she said.

Bifolium nodded. And then he moved away, in moments lost to the throng of people who had gathered around the lift doors.

‘Is he all right?’ Parasiel asked.

‘Bifolium finds it hard to sleep,’ Verso responded. ‘Dreaming like we do, it does not come easy to him.’

Parasiel nodded.

Behind him, the lift waited.

The clanscape is unfinished, your Collection full of ambiguities.

He tugged on Verso's hand, pulling her away from the lift, back towards the library and the silence of books. 'Come on,' he said, 'let's go.'

Perspectives: Intermission

Philip Purser-Hallard

Extracts from the diary of
Professor Bernice Summerfield

23 April 2607
Back on the Collection for a few days between visits to Haldane and – I think – Freedonia. (Can that really be right? To be honest I've lost track.) Stopped to drop off my bags and have a quick shower then Went straight round to Adrian's to pick up Peter, where I found him playing with Incunabula Understaff whatever-the-rest-of-her-name-is Quire.

It's been a while, of course, since first Bev and then Verso allowed me to see some of the Quire's… less inhibited private behaviour. And Jason's filled me in on the changes everyone's found in them since Bev presented her ultimatum.

But I still hadn't expected to see Incunabula *playing*. After being so grown-up (so intolerably pompous, frankly) whenever she's in public, to see her acting just like a normal little girl was very odd indeed.

Thankfully Peter was delighted to see me, leaving his game of Perception and running over to me shouting. 'Mummy's back!'

It's always a relief. Being away so much at the moment. I have visions of him freezing me out. Fixing me with a glassy stare and asking, 'Are you my mummy?' or something. I hugged him gratefully for quite a while.

When we resurfaced, Incunabula had repositioned several of Peter's blocks. 'No, Incunabula,' he said quite patiently, trotting back over to her, Those don't go there. Look –' and he tried to show her how their construction would fall over sideways without the bits she'd moved.

Bugger me if she didn't push the whole pile over, then go into a screaming bloody tantrum.

We all tried to calm her down – me, Peter, Adrian (who'd been in the kitchen trying to find something she'd be happy to eat) – but she was too busy being the little drama queen. More like a toddler than the six- or seven-year-old she seems to be.

(I wonder how old she *is*, actually? For all we know about Quire biology she could have been spontaneously generated five minutes before they came through the time corridor.)

In the end we put her back in her egg and took her home, bawling all the way.

2 May

Back again yesterday evening, as Jason and I had been instructed to attend the official reception for the visit of the Archdean of Zebadee University, on pain of Bev Tarrant's sarcasm.

Could have done with the spare time to work on the paper about time sensitives (must think of a better name – surprisingly large number of the buggers about and no one's found a decent name for the ability).

It was, predictably, as dull as a pair of freshly ironed Y-fronts, but at least it gave me the opportunity to observe some of the recent changes to the Quire.

(*Changes to the Quire*. Honestly, it's beginning to sound like a church newsletter around here.)

It seems the academic staff held a popularity contest while I was away and forgot to tell me. Last time I was around to pay attention, they were finding the Quire awkward, demanding, socially impaired and generally a symptom calling for a soothing suppository. Now suddenly the visiting scholars are everybody's new best friend.

Well, some of them are. Colophon, in particular, was being life and soul enough for a couple of dozen parties – handing out the booze, juggling canapes, telling tall stories and eventually sneaking off conspicuously with the Archdean's pretty aide. Bifolium was there too, although he wasn't quite so popular after hiding calamari in the green salad. (Poor Dr Khalifa. Eight months marooned on Delta Magna would give anybody severe octopodophobia.)

I saw Verso charming a group of students, including Parasiel and Meredith. *[Note to self:* Check up on P's academic progress while here – seemed to be letting it slide a bit last time. Don't want him coming a cropper in his third-year exams.] And a gaggle of middle-aged academics was cooing over Incunabula, who was being insufferably precocious and cute at them.

Dorso was standing nearby looking bored, so I wandered over. I made some inane-parent comment about how nice it was that our offspring had bonded. (Assuming that's what Incunabula is – Dorso's offspring, I mean. As usual, nobody's at all sure.) She gave me her best sourpuss look and said, 'Yes, it's always delightful when she's carried home in tears. Still, at least someone else is getting the benefit of her company for a change.'

So, no change there, then. Honestly, the way she treats that child –

[Remainder of entry is crossed-out and illegible.]

13 May

Dear diary – a sign of the times, and in particular of the increasing popularity of the Quire among the staff, students and sordid hangers-

on of the Collection.

My beloved partner Jason, the light of my life, has started work on another of his sophisticated, self-aware and undeniably artistically valid xenoporn novels.

He's calling it *The Posthuman Always Bangs Twice.*

Oh, my dear diary.

27 May

Another visit home, another official function. This one was for some Human Orthodox bishop who the Reverend Professor Blackbrane's invited to give some lectures on interfaith relations on mixed-species colony worlds.

Surprisingly, she turned out to be a dolphin. Which makes sense in context, but caught me rather off my guard.

The Quire were all over her, for some reason – maybe dolphins are extinct where they come from. Hell, for all I know the whole clan's one-eighth cetacean on their great-grandmother's side.

I noticed they were on their best behaviour with her, though Rubric buttonholed the Rev Prof almost at once and started canvasing him on the question of whether various animals had Buddha-nature, apparently oblivious to the fact that he's not a Buddhist. (Or, as far as I know, a believer in any faith at all. Which made it all the more drily humorous when Braxiatel appointed him the Collection's chaplain. Always the wag, Irving.)

Jason distracted the waiters while I purloined a couple of bottles of wine (generally a wise precaution at theology faculty functions), and we mingled for a bit. I carefully avoided Dorso and Incunabula, and also Bifolium, who was arguing with Blackbrane's wife about the merits of personality downloads for life-extension purposes, about which he seemed to be vehemently in favour.

After a short period of circulating we bumped into Parasiel. 'Hello, Professor S,' he said cheerily. 'Hello, Jason.' I can't think of a single one of my students who'd be less keen on attending anything theological.

'Parasiel.' Jason grinned at him. 'Not here to start a fight with the dog-collar brigade, are you? 'Cause I warn you, you'll get thrown out if you start bashing the –'

I interrupted firmly. 'You haven't gatecrashed, have you, Parasiel? Because from what I hear you'd be better off putting in some extra time in the library.'

He smiled. 'Oh no, Benny. I'm here as a guest. Verso invited me.' He pointed, and I saw the Quire girl coming towards us carrying two glasses of champers. (Quire girl – you see, I'm doing it again. It must have been the mention of dog-collars.)

Verso handed one of the glasses to Parasiel, then slipped her arm into his. She beamed at me. ‘Hello, Benny. It’s very nice to see you again.’

Behind her I saw that Rubric had moved on from Blackbrane and started trading spiritual platitudes with the bishop, who was looking – if you’ll pardon the expression – rather out of her depth.

‘Are you two –’ I was at a loss for words. ‘Surely you’re not a –’

‘An item?’ Parasiel smirked. ‘We certainly are, Professor. Since a few weeks ago now.’

Verso started licking his earlobe.

‘Well, that’s –’ Vocabulary failure again. *Good grief Parasiel, are you sure you’ve thought this through properly?* I didn’t say. *In fact you haven’t given it any thought whatsoever, have you?* I failed to add. *You’re just in it for the hot posthuman bonking action.*

It’s the obvious conclusion, after all. A friendship based around healthy walks and stimulating conversation seems unlikely on balance, what with Parasiel being a notorious shag-monster and Verso having a mental age of, at a generous estimate, thirteen. And it’s difficult to believe either party is remotely serious about the matter, given that she’ll be off back to the distant future in a matter of months. I should never have trusted that lecherous little stoat to get her home after that time I…

Oops.

After that time I got her paralytically drunk.

Oh hell.

It was fortunate, for not-getting-thrown-out-for-starting-a-fight purposes at least, that none of this came out of my mouth. Instead Jason made the kind of coarsely appreciative comment that certain women, for reasons unknown to medical science, find flattering, and the conversation drifted into less contentious arenas.

Across the room Rubric was lecturing Dr Okeroa on some moral issue of vital importance to, I guessed, precisely one of them.

Meanwhile Bifolium had finally worn down Ms Blackbrane, and was now angrily attacking her new position of being broadly in favour of personality downloads for life-extension purposes.

I decided to spend the next few hours focusing on my wine.

False Security

Nick Walters

No place like home, thought Bernice Summerfield as she made touchdown on the Collection.

Three weeks since the Blackbrane reception, another adventure, another cave painting of temporal prognostication, and the yummy homecoming feeling lasted the thirty seconds it took the door to dilate and Bernice to descend the access tongue.

Rubric was waiting for her. Still comfortably bald and wiry, but his smock-thing was gone. Which would have been a good sign of him lightening up for a change – if it hadn't been replaced by something unmistakably a uniform.

A grey-blue, horribly unflattering uniform.

Bernice was immediately on her guard. For one thing, it made his neck scrawny like a chicken's. Rubric thrust something at her; his body language tensely polite, offering a gift he knew the recipient would dislike but not going to take no for an answer. 'Welcome back, Professor Summerfield.'

It was a thin oblong of plastic. Bernice glared at it, then at Rubric.

'What's this?'

'It's your new biodata-metric ID card.'

Bernice folded her arms. 'What happened to the plasti-discs?'

'They've been upgraded,' Rubric said. There was an impatience to his voice, clearly irritated she wasn't enjoying this as much as he was. 'You'll need to hand your old one in.'

'So what's new about these?'

'The latest security measures from Chester Industries,' Rubric said vehemently. 'Guaranteed to keep Primeiros and unwanted visitors at bay.'

'All unwanted visitors?' Bernice asked.

Rubric was still holding out the card. 'Everyone has to have one.'

'Why?'

His face creased. Hell, he was actually getting exasperated. Like he'd been the one who'd just spent thirty-hours crammed into a podule.

'Why?' Benny repeated.

'Security.'

Bernice looked up to see Bev Tarrant slink around the side of the podule.

'Bev! What's all this?'

‘A new security measure. Each BioID card is encoded with DNA –’

‘Hang on! How did you get hold of my DNA?’

Bev glanced at Rubric, whose neck stretched proudly. Bev smiled.

‘We obtained it from a pair of your socks.’

‘Socks?’

‘Yeah.’ Bev smiled.

Bernice let this slide. ‘And what was wrong with the plasti-discs?’

‘Incompatible with the new system. Come on, Benny, you know how vulnerable we are.’

‘We must protect ourselves.’ That was Rubric, sounding less chicken and more parrot.

Bernice noticed that Bev was wearing a uniform too, a fancier version of Rubric’s. Her heart sank. ‘And you’re head of security.’

‘I was voted in.’

Bernice was tired, hungry, and wanted to see people. She sighed, dug out her old plasti-disc and handed it to Rubric, taking the new card to a forced smile from the clansman. ‘Keep the outsiders at bay,’ he said.

Bev’s smile seemed a little more genuine. ‘Remember, keep it with you at all times.’

Bernice twirled the card in her fingers. An efficient, corporate blue with a silver spider’s web logo. A holo of herself smiled up at Bernice.

‘Well,’ Bernice muttered, ‘if it helps to keep the Collection safe…’

‘Outsiders out,’ said Rubric.

‘That’s the idea!’ chimed Bev.

As always, the first thing Bernice did was find Peter.

He wasn’t in the schoolroom; class had finished an hour ago.

Benny’s diurnal rhythm was out of whack after so much time away.

It was afternoon, but to Bernice it felt like morning, yet she was tired.

Space-lag.

Maybe that’s why, as she wandered about the Collection, saying hi to old friends and smiling at strangers, things seemed a little… off.

The Collection seemed quiescent, watchful, as if waiting for something it dreaded, or numb in the aftermath of a tumultuous event like a thunderstorm or a funeral.

But when she asked what was wrong, no one could – or would – say.

And there was something weird about the sky. When she looked up, Bernice glimpsed strands of something, always on the edge of her vision, like retinal floaters.

She found Peter in the Garden of Whispers, playing a game with Adrian and Jason. They didn’t notice her approach; all three intent on the game; something with hoops and tiny robot mannequins.

Something her son had learned whilst she was away.

'Peter!'

He dropped his bat and was halfway to her before it hit the ground.

And suddenly he was in her arms and everything seemed to drain away and she was floating. But when she looked into his eyes, she saw distance. He'd travelled miles and days without her, time they'd never get back. He loved her – she could feel it in the way he held her, the way he glowed – but he didn't need her. If she went away and never returned, he'd miss her, but he'd go on.

Jason and Adrian were switching off the robots and retrieving stray hoops. She walked over to them, hand-in-hand with her son. All four of them together: it felt paradoxically unreal, yet more real than all the places Bernice had seen in her travels.

'Right,' said Adrian, nodding at Bernice. 'Tea time.' He hoisted Peter on to his shoulders and strode off, the boy waving back at his mother.

Bernice blew him a kiss and shouted that she'd see him tomorrow.

She planned to spend the whole day with him, to the exclusion of everyone else. She hated 'quality time', but it was the best she could do.

When Peter and Adrian had disappeared from view, she turned to Jason. He was staring at her in a way she found to her surprise that she liked. 'Best friends now, eh?'

'Ha.' Jason tossed the final deactivated robot into the game box.

'He's the one that let Rubric in to take a pair of your… socks. Very big on the issue of security is our Adrian. Still blames me for Peter going off that time. I mean, he's never actually said, but that's the Killoran way, I suppose. So, how've you been?'

Bernice sighed. 'It's good to be home. Despite all this security bollocks.'

Jason shrugged. 'However bad it is, just remember life under the Axis. Things can never be as bad as that again.'

'Well, it looks like the Primeiro investigations are finishing up, grand juries convened, lots of convictions, and everywhere free from criminal slavery. And this time we didn't even have to do a thing to help.'

'Apart from handing over Bev's ex.'

'The galaxy doesn't stop because we're not involved with it. Ours is just one viewpoint on life.' She paused, 'But there's still the stuff with the Mim and… Oh, never mind.' Bernice shoved his shoulder playfully. 'Just stop tempting fate!'

Jason seemed stunned by the brief moment of physical contact.

'Look, er, fancy going out for a meal tonight? Celebrate your first night back. Proper stuff, fine wine, all the trimmings. Just me and you.'

Bernice closed her eyes. Sounded like heaven. Best not to let him know that, though. 'Yeah – okay. Sounds fun!'

He moved marginally closer. 'And afterwards…'

'And afterwards?'

He grinned. 'Dessert.'

Bernice hadn't seen him for weeks, and suddenly wanted him more than ever. She found kissing him the easiest thing in the world, but had to stop because children were playing nearby and were jeering.

Bernice broke away. She gestured at herself with upturned hands.

'I'm a state. I need a bath. Come back home with me?'

His eyes flashed, then he looked away. 'Love to, but things to do. Bev's orders.'

'What things?'

'Oh, security stuff.'

Bernice felt irked that he didn't seem to want to come with her, but it was probably for the best. As well as a bath she needed some time to get back in synch with Collection-time. 'Okay. Cafe Vosta?'

Jason grinned. 'As if there's anywhere else. See you at eight.'

'Okay.' Bernice felt like a teenager on her first date. She raised a finger. 'Don't be late.'

But she knew he would be. And she found that reassuring beyond words.

Bernice found the apartment they shared surprisingly tidy. Minimal dust, no strewn garments, a profound absence of dirty crockery. She wandered around, tingling all over at the familiarity of home, yet faintly disturbed by the somewhat pathological cleanliness. They'd never been this tidy, what was going on? Had Jason turned over a neat new leaf? She smirked at the thought.

It was only early afternoon, ages until the meal, and nothing sorted a body-clock like a finger-wrinklingly long bath. She kicked off her boots, shed her trousers and slung them across the bed, glad to cause a bit of homely mess amongst the incongruous tidiness.

As they landed, something shot out of a pocket, slithered across the duvet, and disappeared under a pillow.

Bernice walked around the bed and lifted up the pillow. It was her BioID card. 'For the Collection's own good,' she said as she regarded her smiling hologrammatic features.

He's the one that let Rubric in to take a pair of your… socks And then she realised. Jason hadn't tidied it, neither had any cleaner or droid. The place had the look of somewhere that had been thoroughly searched, and then tidied up to hide it. Things put back in the wrong places.

She could feel it. Other people had been here, been through their

stuff. Other eyes – *Rubric's eyes* – had seen things that should only be intimate between her and Jason.

Bernice clenched the card in her hand. It didn't even bend.

Bev had a lot of explaining to do.

Bernice couldn't get in. With the old cards, doors opened as you approached. Not now. Some upgrade.

'BioID card, please,' crackled a speaker.

'I, er, left it at home.'

'Then you must retrieve it.'

'I don't have time. I need to see Bev Tarrant, now.'

'You can't come in without it.'

'Well, what are you going to do? Arrest me?'

The voice – Bernice didn't know whose, probably one of Bev's student recruits – crackled again. 'Technically, being without your BioID card is an offence –'

'For pity's sake!' shouted Bernice. 'It's me, Bernice Summerfield! I've been out there busting my everything for the Collection! Without me there would probably – no certainly – be no Collection! So go on, arrest me, you'll have a riot on your hands!'

'I'm sorry, Professor Summerfield. No exceptions.'

Bernice hammered on the door, kicked it, made as much fuss as she possibly could. 'Let me in!'

A different voice cut in. 'It's okay, Crom, let her in.'

A buzz, a click, and the door opened.

'Sorry about that,' said Bev, not sounding sorry at all. 'We've been recruiting students as security staff part-time, top up their loans, that kind of thing. Some of them have been a bit over-zealous. But you should really carry your card, Bernice.'

Bernice took it from her pocket. 'Had it all the time. I just wanted to see how far you'd go. Would you really have arrested me?'

'Bernice. The situation's too serious to be playing games!'

'Have you arrested anyone for not carrying their card?'

'Not yet. Everyone's cooperating,' said Bev pointedly. 'You've been away, you don't appreciate what it's like. These are dangerous times.'

Bernice wanted to dispute it, but her conversation with Jason was all too recent not to concede Bev had a point.

'This was Braxiatel's world, and whatever steps he'd taken to protect it, he was the only one who knew them.'

'And the vultures have been circling,' said Bernice, beginning to sympathise with Bev and regret her performance at the door. Okay, so we need tight security, but searching people's houses? Don't deny it – I can tell that my home's been done over. What about privacy?'

'Sometimes, individual rights have to be suspended to protect

society.'

'Jeez Louise; Bernice ran a hand through hair that badly needed a wash. And what about these bloody cards? They're bigger than the old ones, and restrict people's movements – oh, probably an advantage to you – and are, basically, crap! If you want to keep tabs on us, why not put implants in our earlobes or something? No danger of leaving them at home!'

Bev moved things around on her desk, putting a stray pair of scissors into a desk-tidy. Bernice could suddenly see her creeping around her apartment with Rubric, prying and prodding. She shuddered.

'The BioID cards may seem like a retrograde step, but they're part of a wider security system.' Bev gestured to a device in the corner of her office, linked by cables to a console on Bev's desk. A white cylinder, four feet high and topped by an organic-looking sphere which pulsed softly with an orange light. It made a faint, contented tinkling sound.

'If you wanted a lava lamp you could have just poured Hass into a bottle.'

'It's the brain of the IDP. Intelligent Defence Plexus. We call it the Mesh.'

Bernice didn't like the sound of that. 'What does it do?'

'The Mesh is a semi-sentient invisible AI bubble around the Collection. It helps keep enemies out, and watches over what's happening below.'

'And it's linked to the cards?'

'That's right. It can trace every card simultaneously. We could upgrade the cards to implants, as you suggested, but we can't afford it. Maybe after the next budget review. Chester Industries have been very competitive with their finance options.'

'So what can this Mesh thing do? Zap us if we step out of line?'

'It's very powerful,' hedged Bev. 'I'm still learning how to program it. But I've set its parameters and there's no danger of it "zapping" anyone.'

'But if it goes wrong, it could. And it is going wrong, isn't it? It's not quite "invisible". I keep seeing things in the sky – strands of stuff.'

'Installation glitches,' said Bev, walking over to the glowing sphere.

It tinkled more loudly as she approached. 'It'll settle down as it grows.'

'You talk as though it's alive. And for some reason, that bothers me more than your random searches, your BioID cards or your student goons…'

'Well, it shouldn't,' murmured Bev, staring into the globe.

'I'll leave you two together, then.'

Bev didn't look up as Bernice left.

It took a long bath, a glass of red and a new frock (courtesy of Jason, imported from the fashion-looms of Auleria; she didn't want to know how he'd got it but was glad he had) to relax Bernice. But, even after that, she still felt slightly on edge. As if she was being watched. And she probably was, by this Mesh thing.

AIs were fine in their place, like the Porters – Joseph had been co-opted into Bev's service in the times while Benny was away after Jason complained about him blocking the screen during the football – but when they surrounded an entire world and were controlled by one person then there was serious case for worry. Or was she just being paranoid?

No. She had to be sure Peter was safe when she was away; it was the only way she could go away. She trusted Adrian and Jason to look after him, but it wasn't the same as being there. So was Bev's new regime actually going to help keep him safe – or put him in danger?

It was hard to forget that Braxiatel's road to hell had started in much the same fashion. Bernice just hoped all the rules and restrictions and sacrifices were worth it, to keep Peter safe.

Right, to the back of her mind with all that. Bernice was determined to relax tonight. Quick look in the mirror. Tired eyes, but scrubbed up well. How could Jason resist her?

Cafe Vosta hadn't changed. There were probably surveillance devices, but they were well hidden by the mood lighting or concealed in the decorative creepers that twined their way along the walls. It was a balmy midsummer evening, and the windows were open. Jason had booked one of the best tables, by the biggest window with the best view of the gardens. Perfect for an early summer evening.

Bernice waited for Jason, sipping a half of Admiral's Old Antisocial and gazing out at the stars, trying to forget that between them and herself lay the Mesh.

And the ugly incident going on outside.

Because on the path by the lake, Dorso was gearing up to tear Rubric a new one.

'You're old,' she was saying. 'In the structure of this clan, you would be wise and revered. Look at you! Incunabula has more sense.'

Rubric pulled his shoulders back. It should have been a chest-puffing show of defiance, but the uniform wasn't helping. 'I stood by once,' he said, 'as those entities massacred the innocent.'

'They were ghosts, Rubric. What were you going to do? Lecture them into the ether?'

'I will not stand idly by as this world is threatened. Outsiders, insurgents, they are all threats to the identity of the clanscape. We chose to come here, to immerse ourselves in it. We have a

responsibility.'

'And if there were any threat, I might – *might* – agree with you. But you can look at the clanscape, and it is unchanged. There is no threat from without!'

They carried on like that until Jason turned up at ten past the hour, his pushing between them seemingly enough to break the argument.

'Sorry about that – did I miss anything?' he asked as he pulled his chair back, making a dreadful scraping noise against the stone tiles.

Benny flinched, hoping it wasn't going to be one of those evenings when everything he did rubbed her up the wrong way.

'Nooo problem.' Bernice perused the wine list. Ten minutes is quite good, for you. Besides, there were street performers.'

'Bit of a what you'd call flap on.'

'Dorso and Rubric? Well, I suppose you could call it –' Bernice stopped, glanced up. 'You did mean Dorso and Rubric?'

Jason shook his head. 'Something odder. No, really. All the clocks in the Museum of Temporal Measurement melted.'

'What?'

'The clocks. They melted. Professor Langleigh came running in blathering about all his precious clocks melting. But when we checked, they were okay.'

'Thank goodness for that,' muttered Bernice. 'That collection is priceless.'

'Bev's having Langleigh vetted. Reckons he's doing some serious hallucinogenics.'

'Huh!' Bernice snorted. 'He'd consider an extra lump of sugar in his tea an act of stupendous decadence.' She studied Jason to see if he agreed, but he was intent on the menu.

Bernice pushed thoughts about dissolving timepieces out of her mind, returned her attention to the wine list. 'Chateau Yquatine!' She gestured to the waiter for two chilled bottles. 'Better make it three!' she called after his retreating back.

'Hey, what about me?' joked Jason.

'Yeah… what about you?' said Bernice, narrowing her eyes. 'Been behaving whilst I've been away?'

'Yes.' He smiled. Then stopped smiling. Then smiled again.

She couldn't tell when he was lying. She used to be able to, but she suddenly realised she'd forgotten how. Too long away, too much changing. Bernice stared at him, at the long strand of hair that was curling down over his right eye and wondered whether this newfound naivete made him more or less attractive. In the end, she just settled for asking: 'Seriously?'

His smile faded. 'Seriously.'

He sounded and looked serious, so Bernice decided he must be

serious. And she wondered what he was thinking, looking back at her. Had he missed her, like she was coming to miss him?

The thought occurred that, all of a sudden, they were like a courting couple. Before, they'd always been all or nothing. From day one, they'd been bonded at the hip or broken apart. Passion or trauma, and never the tangential orbit of a real romance.

And that was what this year had given them. For everything it had taken away where Peter was concerned, this was what it had given back. Dinner dates, languorous partings, and – finally – passion.

And then there was the look in his eyes. Serious. But did she want to be serious with him? How serious?

Thankfully, right then, the waiter arrived with the wine – three bottles nestled in a silver bucket of ice and water. A sight so beautiful that Bernice almost burst into tears.

Treating the wine with hushed respect, the waiter poured, and Bernice sipped. Apples and summer and honey and bliss.

Jason was looking expectantly at her. Bernice smiled, still trying to assimilate her train of thought, not wanting to verbalise it so quickly.

Small-talk, then. 'Peter looks well.'

'He misses his mum.'

That sent a bittersweet shudder right through Bernice. 'Oh…'

Jason reached across the table and held her hand.

Their eyes met. She saw him as she had once seen him. And she could see, in his eyes. Love. He genuinely loved her.

'We were married once,' he whispered softly.

She smiled. 'As if I could forget.'

'This is good,' he said. 'Being with you.' He was struggling towards something.

'Look, Jason –'

Then, in the distance but somehow all around them, a bell tolled, deep and sonorous.

'Where's that coming from?' Bernice said. 'Can't be last orders already.'

Jason looked out of the window, annoyed by the diversion. 'Sounds like it's the bell tower on the Aina Gallery. Probably just bell-ringing practice. Look, Benny –'

The bell tolled again, and Bernice looked out now, trying to trace the sound. Jason was right. Muffled by the firs, it was coming from the direction of the gallery, but something was wrong with that picture…

'That can't be right.'

'What do you mean?'

It tolled again.

'The bells over the Aina Gallery are ornamental. There are no ropes,

no access. They're carved stone, they can't bloody ring!'

Jason opened his mouth to speak, but Benny waved him quiet. How could strictly ornamental bells be ringing?

Other diners were looking around uneasily and all conversation had ceased.

'Look at the stars!' someone shouted.

Bernice looked up. The night sky was flickering on and off like defective fairy lights.

'Hey!' Jason clapped his hand to his pocket and pulled out his BioID card. He stared at it, then yelped and threw it to the floor. 'It – bit me!'

Bernice reached for her bag and shook her BioID card out on to the table, taking care not to touch it. She gasped. Her holo had turned to look at her – and it was talking.

'Who do you think you are? You're forty and past it. Jason only wants to boff you, Peter hates you, you're an academic laughing stock!'

Angrily, Bernice swept it away. 'That's the spirit!' chirped the card as it skittered across the tiles and out of sight beneath a dessert trolley.

'Smash it!' bellowed Jason suddenly. He leapt to his feet, sending his chair crashing backwards.

Bernice gaped at him.

The bell tolled again. Jason grabbed one of the unopened bottles of Chateau Yquatine by the neck and raised it above his head. Bernice scrambled out of her chair as he smashed it down on the table. Glass flew everywhere, wine splashed over the cloth and dripped onto the stone tiles.

Jason leered at her crazily.

'What the hell are you doing?'

'Smash! It!' he yelled again.

Then Bernice realised that everyone in the café was doing the same – picking up things and using them to bash other things. Chairs crashed through windows, umbrellas beat at plants, walking sticks thrashed decorative sculptures.

She could see Bifolium in the midst of it. Sedate in a dark corner all evening, he'd suddenly come alive, hollering and attacking anything in sight.

And everyone was yelling, screaming, shouting, in time with the tolling bell.

'Smash! It!'

Jason leapt into the melee. A dinner plate hurtled past Bernice's head. Forgetting Jason, she ran from Cafe Vosta, her mind whirling.

Outside, distant screams and the sounds of destruction reached her.

Above, the stars flickered and great clouds of something swooped about the heavens.

'Everyone's gone mad,' she whispered. 'Even the stars…'

The bell tolled again, coming from around and within her. Not something she could actually hear, because those bells didn't ring.

But something she could feel, could think she heard, which meant it was all in her mind, and –

Hoping that Peter was safe, that Adrian was protecting him, Bernice set off at a run.

Bernice didn't need her card to get into the building. There was no one manning the door and it was open.

Bev was in her office.

She stood between Bernice and the Mesh's brain, her face a snarling mask.

'Bev, listen to me – we've got to destroy that thing!'

Bev grabbed something from her desk and lunged at Bernice. A flash of metal. Bernice dodged to one side and grabbed Bev's arm. As Bev screamed and hissed, Bernice twisted her arm behind her back, grabbed the scissors, threw them to one side and shoved Bev to the floor.

Then she dodged round the desk, picking up the nearest, heaviest object – a hefty stapler – and stood before the brain of the AI Mesh.

Its tinkling had modulated to an agitated warble and it was glowing blue. It looked sick. She could feel cold tendrils in her mind. Better act now whilst her senses were still intact – and before Bev recovered.

She brought the stapler down onto the crown of the glowing globe.

It cracked like an egg, screamed. And the madness stopped.

The Mesh died. It fell to the ground as gelatinous rain, then seeped away.

All over the Collection, people came to, wondering what they were doing and why everything around them was in such a state.

Peter Summerfield woke crying from a nightmare, and his father Adrian Wall soothed him back to sleep with a Killoran lullaby.

Jason found himself in the middle of the wreckage of Cafe Vosta, with cuts in his hands and his trousers soaked with wine.

'Must have been one hell of a party,' he muttered.

He looked around for Benny, but she wasn't there. What had happened? The last thing he remembered was looking at the menu.

A sudden panic filled him, and his hand went to the pocket of his jacket. Positioning himself against the wall, he extracted the box and opened it. The ring was still there; a single diamond set in a gold

band. He stared at it for a long time, trying to remember what had just happened. Trying to remember how Benny had looked.

'Too soon,' he whispered. 'Too soon.'

He closed the box and turned to help the other diners clear the place up. One of the heavy oak serving tables had been overturned, and he joined Bifolium in putting his back against it, trying to lever it upright.

'When everything's normal again,' Jason groaned through his teeth, heaving against the wood. 'When everything's normal.'

He never saw it, but beside him Bifolium's eyes were shut with pain. Behind them, a broom swept his and Bernice's BioID cards up with the rest of the rubbish.

Bernice looked at the remains of the Mesh's brain as it leaked viscous grey fluid to the floor. 'Well, that's him told.'

She turned to see Bev sitting up, looking around in wonder. 'What am I doing on the floor? What happened?'

'What happened is that I was right,' said Bernice, helping her up.

'You mentioned Brax's security measures? Months ago he told me he was doing something, something to protect the Collection. Its own dimension or something.'

'But… we're not in our own dimension,' Bev said. 'The universe is right out there. We interact with it every single day, and I wouldn't be spending my time fretting about the sodding Mim if –'

'I know, I know,' Benny said. 'But whatever Brax ended up doing, it didn't get on with your little toy. So it got rid of it, with my help. Its methods are a little strange, but that's to be bloody expected with Brax.'

'I remember – attacking you,' said Bev.

'Yeah,' Bernice said. 'This Mesh thing was using you to protect itself. Must have formed some sort of telepathic link with you. Like the Collection did with me.' Bernice wasn't comfortable with the idea, but it's what seemed to have happened. 'Two security systems scrapping and us caught in the middle.' She made to leave – had to check if Peter was okay. And Jason – and everyone. 'Don't fix it or replace it,' she warned Bev. 'Whatever comes, we'll take care of it.'

As she left and looked up at the stars, steady and set in their courses, she wondered if that were true.

What if she hadn't been there?

The Painting on the Stair

Simon Bucher-Jones

> As I was going up the stair
> I met a man who wasn't there
> He wasn't there again today
> I wish, I wish he'd go away.
>
> – Anon.

Odd how things creep up on us. Take this diary entry. Innocuous enough, written some months before Braxiatel's sins found him out.

… 'Now I don't want to come over all Bluebeard,' Braxiatel said suddenly at the end of the policy meeting. The kind of phrase to make you choke on the last of the bourbon creams with a laugh that you didn't acknowledge for fear of having to explain it.

'But,' he glared at my crumb-spluttering, I'm going to have to ask you to stay away from the upper spiral gallery for the next month or so.'

'Really, why?' Jason asked, with affected boredom. 'It's practically in the eaves of the building. I can't imagine anyone ever goes there anyway. Too many steps.'

'Indeed,' Braxiatel, nodded, 'and as that part of the Collection was constructed to profoundly harmonious principles, your lack of interest isn't surprising. I intend to use it to house the infamous Von Holt Collection during its cataloguing and preparation for an exhibition on Ballarallia. It's not, I think, the kind of material we want cluttering up the main thoroughfares. A nice calm, backwater part of this lagoon will serve old Holt's obsession very well for the three or four weeks it will take to mark 'em up, and, er, move 'em out.'

It was folly to attempt to read Brax's body language with any expectation of precision. But I'd known him long enough now to spot the signs of disquiet. Contractions and American vernacular came high on the list.

'What is old Holt's obsession?' Jason jumped in before I could ask, a habit he called 'taking an interest in the conversation', and I called 'bloody infuriating'.

'Was,' Braxiatel said, hands steepled, eyes dark under lowering brows. 'He was found dead a week ago. It's the heir-apparent to Von Holt Paraceuticals that's signed off the tour of the collection; a thing that Patrick Mason Clive Von Holt III would never do. Indeed, my

other reason for using the Gallery is the heir's insistence that the works be seen at their best, even in transit.'

'Died in mysterious circumstances, eh?' Jason pursued, paying no attention to Brax's small talk. 'Does Patrick Mason Clive Von Holt IV have an alibi?'

'Chairmistress Clarinda Von Holt was, I understand, out dancing at the time,' Braxiatel intoned. 'She is currently the holder of the Four Moons' Ballroom Dancing Championship and was defending her title, in full view of her partner, the Hon. Melkin Quinly, the Four Moon House Orchestra, and roughly 438 competitors and paying notables. Including, for my sins, myself.'

'And yet you only "understand" she was dancing?' Jason pounced.

'There's some doubt?' He was evidently poised to run off into a plot involving dancing androids, cloning, time travel, or – most likely – scatological xeno-porn.

'I know she was dancing,' Brax replied, his voice rising in pitch. 'I understand that the dancing coincided with the time of death.'

'And the collection is?' I asked sweetly, moving the discussion back to the point Brax seemed intent on glossing over.

'Dangerous, Irrational, or Cursed Art.'

– *From Bernice Summerfield's Diary.*

That was then, this is now.

'With everything going on,' Bernice said decisively, I'd forgotten about the prohibition. But now we know that Braxiatel didn't always have our best interests nestled in his bosom, or at least that he had substantially different ideas as to what those interests were…'

'You think we ought to break it?' Jason said, a near grin on his features. It was the thought of breaking a commandment.

'Investigate it anyway,' Bernice replied. They were back in Cafe Vosta, attempting to pick up again on the meal that had been so rudely interrupted by rampaging diners a few weeks earlier. 'Okay, so the Mesh is gone, but the quantum tagging program's still running. And while I don't like the idea of drones scampering about the place knocking over vital Ming vases, I'd at least like to know what vital Ming vases they're knocking over.'

Benny had grown quietly proprietorial about the Collection over the years, and while the idea of security-tagging all the exhibits seemed like a good one, imprinting a watermark – even at an invisible quantum level – still felt like vandalism.

'Doesn't matter,' Jason said. 'The Spiral Gallery remains explicitly excluded from all internal orders, enactments, policies, or scanning. Nothing up there's going under the sensors. Not even Crozier was allowed up there.'

‘That’s odd, isn’t it?’

‘Legal reasons, you missed all the row. Bev, Mahalia, load of Zzntythi barristers.’ He grinned, ‘But it turned out I was right and Brax was wrong – again. Chairmistress Clarinda hung herself, leaving the Von Holt Collection in limbo. She’d agreed the transhipment, but what with her father’s mysterious death, and her suicide possibly suggesting guilt, it was arguable she wasn’t legally the chief stockholder under Four Moon’s no-profit-from-killing-daddy laws. Ballarallia backed out of the Exhibition. So this stuff is held until lawyers can determine the next next of kin.’

Benny nodded sagely. ‘How did she do it, what with the dancing?’

Jason let his eyes go all wide and manic, and deepened his voice, a notch. ‘No one knows!’ He took a sip of wine, let his tones go back to their normal slurry innuendo-level. ‘She didn’t bother putting the means in her suicide note.’ He paused, a hint of admiration creeping into his voice. ‘Pity really, it could have been the perfect crime if she hadn’t lost her nerve. Although I suppose hiding the motive was always going to be a problem; everyone knew she and her father hated each other. He was about to disinherit her, and she’d tried to have him committed.’

Bernice shrugged. She didn’t think she was bereft of human sympathy, but there was too much going on in the galaxy to spare much compassion for a dead murderous rich bitch some dozen star systems away.

‘So,’ she summarised, ‘it’s not ours to scan, and Brax left strict instructions it wasn’t to be viewed.’

‘Right,’ Jason nodded

‘Pack a picnic?’

There were just under a hundred items. Ninety-seven, to be exact, mostly pictures, but there was a brief outbreak of sculpture here and there, like the 3-D gimmicks in a B-movie.

These days, now that Jason was firmly off the on-off, on-off romance list, an ex-ex as it where, Bernice actually found she could have some fun in his company. Revisit some of the old games. One of them was guidebook upmanship. Jason had a flipscreen link to Mahalia’s master catalogue, which in turn had a hyper-hyperlink to the various galactic infosquirtnets. Bernice had her archaeological experience. She usually won.

Each of them tried to one-up the other with their knowledge of the exhibits, Bernice without a safety-net, and Jason ticking the ones he’d seen on the flipscreen’s menu like a boy with an I-Spy Book Of Cursed & Eldritch Pictures.

‘Number 04,’ Jason said, staring at it. ‘A big swirly thing painted in

what looks like tapioca pudding. It's a Grey period, Milchmann apparently.' He paused. 'It was painted by the milkman? And people pay money for this?'

'Think at it,' Benny said. 'Albrect ab Swenson-Milchmann was one of the Pentraxian pioneers of Transubstantive art: every painting its own psychodrama. Oh great, nice.' With a red face denoting much concentration, Jason had coaxed something extremely rude from the surface of the picture.

'Self-portrait,' he grinned.

'As seen through telescope,' Bernice sighed.

They passed a set of mathematical paintings (nos. 11-21), beginning with Escher and ending with the tour-de-forces of Twinbrant – the co-joined clone painter from Artelon – illustrative of non-Euclidean geometry. Twinbrant's *Magnificent Octopus* had been painted with hyper-real brushes engineered so each stroke delivered an additional 'imaginary' amount of paint with every real splatter. It conveyed the sense of being deeper than the canvas, and not entirely there.

Next were paintings linked to famous madnesses: the painting, on which Wilde based *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (32); the sub-cityscapes of the artist H.P. Lovecraft masked under the name of Pickman (33-37); the arctic hallucinatory landscapes of Nicholas Roche that inspired *The Mountains of Madness* (38-41); and three versions of *The Crying Boy,* one of which was reputedly genuine (42-44).

'Sun newspaper scam!' Bernice lunged expertly, a second before Jason.

'Number 45. The cursed painting done by Marilyn Manson that ended Nicholas Cage and Lisa Marie Presley's marriage. Circa 2006. This lot are just publicity stunts,' Jason grumbled.

'And they got the date wrong.'

They moved on along the gallery.

'Eurgh,' said Jason. 'Look at this one. *Pogo The Clown,* painted John Wayne Gacy. Circa 2001. I mean, I never liked his films but –'

'He wasn't the actor, you clonk, he was a serial killer.'

'Yeah? Must have been while I was off earth. He had the same name, bummer of a coincidence!'

'He was named after him,'

'John Wayne was named after a serial killer! Ow!'

Bernice rubbed her knuckles.

After the 'Cursed Celebrity' part of the display, and before what Braxiatel's partially completed catalogue had described as the 'Outsider Art Exhibit', they decided to have their picnic. Out of sight of Pogo and his ilk, in the stairwell between the middle and upper tiers of the Spiral Gallery.

‘It’s not that bad a collection’, Jason remarked, waving a ham sandwich in illustration. ‘A bit obsessed with the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.’

‘We’ve got the Outsiders next.’

‘I thought that meant, er, you know, urn…’ Jason summoned up his reserves of tact. ‘Mad people.’

‘What?’

‘Painting as therapy,’ he intoned, pulling faces to illustrate just what he thought of therapy. ‘Twee grinning humanoid cats, canvases with infinite teeny detail, and lots of naked crumpet. That one who painted pictures of fairy fellows, got a name like someone’s father.’

‘I suppose you mean Richard Dadd? Who painted *The Fairy Feller’s Masterstroke* while incarcerated for the murder of his father?’

‘I quite like that one. Have they got it?’

‘No,’ Bernice answered, attempting to skewer her juice carton with a straw. ‘It’s in the Tate Archive on Earth. We’ve got his *Agony-Raving Madness and Murder*, though. It was item 25.’

‘I missed that one.’

‘Too busy with item 24, Werner Kalem’s *Nine Breasted Death-Goddesses Of Phobos.’*

Lovely brush strokes, I thought,’ he declared airily.

‘Some sort of strokes were clearly on your mind.’

Jason very nearly objected, then had the good grace to change the subject. ‘Right, so if we’ve done the pictures painted by people who murdered other people and got locked up as loonies in the middle gallery, what are the Outsider works in the upper?’

Bernice reached over to tap his flipscreen. ‘Paintings done between now and the twenty-first century, paintings done by aliens, and apparently a set of six paintings time-scooped from the future in an abortive attempt to rescue plays from the Library at Alexandria that went wrong.’ She paused. ‘I hate time-travel experiments.’

‘Which reminds me,’ Jason smirked, ‘What do you think Doggles needs with seven quantum generators and a chronometric barometer?’

Bernice stopped, looked at him. ‘You have got to be kidding me.’

He shook his head. ‘After the business with the pen, Bev had me do an inventory.’

‘But she told him. No more trans-temporal shit.’

‘I don’t think he’s listening,’ Jason answered. ‘Besides, how do we know Doggles’s machine isn’t going to be the success that revolutionises galactic thinking?’ He waggled a sandwich crust at her,

‘We’ve got a whole family of time travellers visiting now. They’re proof the human race eventually learns one end of a time machine from the other aren’t they?’

‘Are they?’ Bernice batted the crust away.

‘Aren’t they?’

‘How do we know they didn’t steal it?’

Jason considered this, his rate of sandwich chewing falling as he did so. Bernice had been joking, but something seemed to have struck a chord. ‘What if they aren’t human?’ he pondered. ‘What if we shouldn’t trust them, if they’re really working for something vast, unknowable and uncanny, waiting up ahead in ambush in the future. Something we all come to.’ He swallowed, ‘In the end-days.’

‘Bloody hell, Jason, I was only talking. Sure, they’re not normal current-century types, but that’s no reason to get all paranoid. Brax was happy to invite them… Oh.’ She paused, ‘Is that it?’

‘Maybe,’ Jason, hunched over his half-eaten sandwich, dejected. ‘I mean, they were creepy before, just standing around, watching, all cryptic and that, but now…’ He looked up, real pain in his eyes.

‘Colophon’s become this great frathouse lummox. All “*this thing you pastlings call buttered-toast is intoxicating, pass the mead and that buxom wench*”.’ He met her gaze, stoney serious. ‘He wants our women.’

‘You’re not getting invites to the student parties any more, are you?’

Benny rolled her eyes. ‘And I would have thought you and a “frathouse lummox” would have a lot in common.’

‘Would you?’ Jason’s words came through gritted teeth. ‘Well I don’t. He’s hairy, his eyes go all goggly. And something’s just not right. It’s, it’s like that painting we passed? The one where the man’s waiting on the bench by the river, putting bread down for the ducks? And we can see, but he can’t that the ducks are spooked because of something coming out of the woods behind him, something in shadow, that looks like its wearing a robe? Well that’s how I feel. Something’s coming up behind us and we’re not seeing it, everything in front is normal and mundane and obvious and just there to distract us until it’s got razor-wire round our throats.’

‘Okay, quit it. You’ve freaked me out now,’ Bernice sulked. ‘What painting was that? I don’t remember seeing anything with sinister ducks.’

‘It wasn’t the ducks that were sinister!’ Jason shouted. ‘And how could you not have seen it? You were keeping up your “nanny knows best” commentary the whole way. I can even remember what you said: “Umpty-nine: painted by notorious mass-murderer Joseph Mengele on a canvas of tanned human skin, in the back rooms of Auschwitz-Birkenau, sent to his mentor Doktor Verschuer at the Kaiser Wilhem institute, lost when the disgusted Verschuer burned the two truckloads of Mengele’s notes and rediscovered in 1980 when it was auctioned on the black market as the work of the deceased Wolfgang Gerhard.’”

‘That’s not funny.’

‘I didn’t say it was,’ Jason protested.

‘There’s nothing like that in the collection,’ Bernice snapped.

‘Nothing. Yes I can laugh at a painting a murderer did four hundred years ago. God knows, I’ve got the same black humour as any archaeologist. But I don’t joke about Nazis, earth or space-grown, not after all the things that have happened to us.’ Bernice’s voice was dangerously near an edge.

‘What’s this, a picnic?’ The bounding tread of Colophon’s great hairy feet (unshod) sounded as he descended from the upper level of the Spiral. For some reason, there was a Stetson on his head and a leather vest and pair of chaps over his toga, is there any of your buttered-toast? I find the smell intoxicating.’

With a scream, Jason was past Bernice, raining a series of blows down on Colophon’s muscular arms, hitting him with every martial art he’d ever faked knowing, spittle flying onto the pink sunglasses that Colophon had inherited one drunken night and crooked over his broad ears.

The Quire, more startled than anything, merely swayed back slightly. ‘Whao there, boy,’ he grunted. ‘Have you been at the sauce little fellah? Got a still up here, where it’s still, yah?’

‘It’s him,’ Jason shouted, ‘the thing from the painting, stop him!’

And then grotesquely, he went limp. Everywhere but his neck that corded fiercely as his head flew back to glare at Benny, leering over one shoulder, hunched and twisted, and he howled. A long mad howl. Until, understanding the look on Bernice’s face with all the empathy he had gained so far among these odd past people, Colophon loosened his grip on Jason’s left wrist, and knocked him, as carefully as possible, unconscious.

‘Paw!’ Colophon said.

‘You want what?’ Bev asked. Her hair was disarrayed, her desk a mess of communiques. Draconia’s territorial expansion was under way again, and no one was forgetting their claim on the Collection’s area of space. Bev probably didn’t have time for this, but Jason was in a coma and Bernice needed to do something about it, something quick.

‘I want one of your tagging drones to go through the Von Holt Collection and itemise each misbegotten thing in it. Then we can sit down here, go through the descriptions until we find the painting Jason described, and then break open some flame-throwers and burn it to a crisp.’

Bev scrunched her eyes shut. ‘You want to run detailed documentation drones through artefacts we don’t own with a view to destroying one of them?’ She looked up, eyes heavy. ‘Have you any idea how that will rebound on our insurance? And all because Jason

Sorry-I-lifted-that-pen-and-nearly destroyed-the-Collection-by-being-so-bloody-stupid Kane…' She took a deep breath, '…has had a bit of a turn? Have you considered it was probably a flashback to his days snorting draino off nubile aliens.'

'Draino,' Colophon said in admiration. He'd draped his bulky form over one of Bev's armchairs, glasses askew, one hand scratching something under his robe. Benny didn't want to think about what it was he might be scratching. 'He'll be fine. I often go to the Upper Spiral Gallery and never feel anything but most peaceful.' He smiled, ''s great for a hangover.'

Benny could see Bev making a mental note about how Colophon had been ignoring the off-limits stricture.

'Well maybe it doesn't affect you,' Benny said. 'Besides, we were in the Middle Spiral, not the Upper, so we've already narrowed it down.'

'But I've seen that painting. In the Upper Gallery. There's a man feeding quackers, yes, and in the background his buxom wench comes out of the trees with a fresh loaf of bread for the little birds. It's one of the six paintings which came from your future.'

'Who painted it?' Bernice asked, fingers crossed it wasn't Wolfgang Gerhard.

'It was painted twelve centuries from now, but the name is quite illegible.'

'Right,' Bernice took a deep breath, fixed on Bev. 'If I can't toast it, at least let me pin it down. How can it be in the Upper and Lower Galleries, while I never saw it at all?' Bev still wasn't listening. Just sorting papers. Plan B. 'And hypercable the Four Moon Constabulary, just in case this is a murder weapon.'

That did it.

'Pardon, me?'

'The owner of this collection was killed, maybe by his daughter, and just possibly her first act before getting too guilty to live was to send the murder weapon out of the investigator's jurisdiction hidden in a collection of hideous death art, right?'

Bev looked unconvinced.

'Think about the PR. *Braxiatel Collection Houses Killer Picture That Killed Twice.* You don't want those kind of headlines again, do you?'

Bev sighed. 'I'll cable the investigators.' Her voice softened, 'See that Jason's all right, he's not nearly as distasteful a stud as he'd like me to think he is.'

'So, which is it then?' Benny asked Colophon.

They were standing in the Upper Gallery, Colophon scratching an armpit and peering over his sunglasses. He frowned, 'It's gone. Vanishing paintings. Weirdomundo!'

Benny scanned the row of pictures before them. ‘Six paintings from the future. No. 97: a Dali-esque landscape that changes colour. No. 96: Mr Potato-Head as St. Sebastian pierced by skewers. No. 95: a Klein Bottle full of ants wearing bowler hats and umbrellas. No. 94: the exhumed body of Damien Hurst, cut in half and pickled, by the artist formerly known as the Hyper-Evolved Cow. How am I doing?’

Colophon’s fingers flashed over the flipscreen. Despite his bulk, he was a lot quicker than Jason.

‘The last painting was actually by the Hyper-Evolved Cow Collective,’ he tugged at the rim of the Stetson, ‘but pretty good goin’ missy.’

‘Er. Colophon?’

‘Yup.’

‘Has someone been showing you cowboy films, at all?’

‘Buckin’ Bronco Party,’ he replied sagely. ‘Complete with wet T-shirts.’

‘Oh dear god,’ Benny said. She hurriedly turned back to the paintings. ‘No. 93: *The Unmade-bed Of The Last Pure Bred Human*, a canvas depicting an upright torture-frame, empty and forbidding. Creepy, but not what Jason saw. No. 92: what the hell is that?’

‘How did I miss that?’ Colophon said. ‘It’s the duck picture. Look at those busters.’

‘No.’ Benny insisted, ‘it’s not. It’s a picture of some ducks Peter drew that I have stuck on my fridge, that’s what it is. What’s it doing with famous artwork of the future, being mistaken by you, for Jason’s account of his memory of the works of Doctor bloody Mengele!’

Colophon patted Benny’s arm. ‘Calm, little lady.’

‘I. Am. Calm. Completely calm. Calm, yes. Calm.’ She sighed, Tell me what the pad says for 92.’

‘“*Co-incidence*: a powerful piece of post-human metamorphic art which uses modulated false-memory to make itself relevant to the observer in a way designed to trigger emotional responses.”’ He looked up at the painting again, That explains the woman with the big busters, then.’

‘Don’t need to think about that, thank you.’ She looked at the painting. Right. So it sits here and you see it and because you’re feeling all buckin’ bronco, you see a Rhinemaiden fantasy.

‘But then Jason attacks you and it tells your memory that it’s what he saw, because what he saw generated his emotions, and they caused responding emotions of anger in you, right?’

‘Yeah, I should have squashed the little runt, one two, to the jaw. Zoom to the moon.’

‘Well I’m glad you didn’t. And if we can stay on point here: meanwhile, I remind you of the party and suddenly it’s busters bustin’

out all over again.! She sighed, 'Whereas, I see a picture that keys to my love of Peter and hence to my worry that his picture being here in this mad house might mean he was going to grow up to be a famous serial killer. Great. I guess this painting really does speak to you, but it's still not what Jason saw. We never got up here. But equally, we went right through the lower Gallery, work-by-work, and there was nothing like the picture he mentioned. Nothing remotely ducky, and nothing, despite all the attempts, half so creepy as what he saw.'

'I wonder about your art.'

'My art?'

'Pre-human, ah, pre-clan art. These galleries are so restful. It's like being awake in here, and yet you fill them with horrors and dreams, and tell yourselves the horrors are redeemed.'

Benny moved off, back towards the staircase. 'We're full of nonsense like that, don't let it get to you. Aaargh!'

'Benny?'

'Sorry, sorry. I just thought I saw it. It's not. It's a lot of bubbles in a big bobbly bag of bubbles. Nothing like scary ducks, how on earth could I…' She paused, scratched her head. 'Colophon, what does Braxiatel's guide have to say about the first picture on this level?'

He consulted the flipscreen. 'No. 48: *The Human Condition,* a picture depicting a human foot stamping on an adder. There's a footnote about Genesis.'

'Doesn't sound very alien'.

'It was painted by a Reptile.'

'Wait, item 48?'

'Yes.'

'The last painting on the lower Gallery is number 46. So where's 47? No, first what is it. What's Brax's line?'

'"No. 47 is an especially interesting piece. Painted directly onto a temporal fold, it cannot be experienced in time. It can be remembered or anticipated, but it does not reside in the now. Moving past it towards the Upper Gallery, it is remembered, causing the reconsideration of the pieces behind; moving past it towards the Lower, it is looked for in every other work, until disappointingly it cannot be found. Its artist is unknown. Some suggest it has been formed by the pressure of the other works, of the meeting of the evil of past men, with the evil of the alien and the future.'"

'Scared,' Bernice said. That's not his normal writing style.' She sat weakly against a pillar of salt carved into the shape of a women. 'And Jason's in a coma, and we can't destroy or tape off a painting we can't be in the same moment as.' She felt a pain between her breasts and a desire to weep that was as unlike her as fear was unlike Brax.

'It's evil, it attacked Jason, and, and it's not ours, we're contracted

to give it back, we can't brick it up!'

Her voice sounded hollow in her own ears.

'Bernice!'

She opened her eyes to a familiar mess of floppy hair.

'Jason!' She smiled, then frowned. 'Hang on, isn't this the wrong way round? You were zonked out and I was…'

'You got knocked out this time,' Jason explained. 'Colophon seems to think it's a patent psychological medicine, and he might be right. I've been up and around and fingers crossed non-paranoid for a while.'

Benny started to push herself up in the bed, but Jason laid a hand on her shoulder.

'Don't panic. Peter's with Adrian. Also Bev's had a hypercable from the cops about the murders.'

'Plural?' Benny said. 'Could you brink me a cup of tea or a lack Daniels or a triple choc cookie or something.'

'In a minute.' He was too busy being knowledgeable Benny had a feeling it was payback for showing off with the paintings. 'Seems the daughter wasn't suicidal at all. Or at least if she was, she cunningly poisoned herself and then hung herself after she was dead to make it look like she'd chosen a different method of suicide.'

'So,' Bernice surmised, 'the daughter has an alibi for the father's death with all the dancing, and the father has an alibi for the daughter's owing to being dead. Did anyone else hate them?'

'Practically everybody on three out of four moons. Unfortunately. You rest while I search for sugary snacks.'

Later on, and empty cellophane lay on the bed, surrounded by faint chocolate smudges.

'Okay,' Bernice said. 'So I faint, and you go hyper.'

'Colophon thinks it's the effect of the time fold on the "pre-clan" nervous system, going one way towards painting 47 generates memory and hyperactivity, going the other way gives you anticipation and ennui.' He paused. And I'd just like you to think about the possible implications of his interest in "pre-clan" nervous systems and my assertion that he's only here for the women.'

'You'd think it would be the other way around,' Bernice mused.

'Hmm?'

'You'd think memory would cause ennui and anticipation hypertension.' She shook her head, 'I guess that's the art.'

'Never mind that,' Jason said, 'what I want to know is –'

'He's a fratboy with a cowboy fixation and a fondness for wet T-shirts,' Benny said. 'The only kind of gynaecological experiments he's been conducting would have your full, if slightly envious, approval.'

'– did it have something to do with the murders because it's pretty

coincidental if it didn't.'

'Oh,' Benny said. 'You're just agog to know who killed the dancing qu'een, aren't you?'

'Pretty much, yes.'

'Well,' she said. 'You'll be pleased to know I've got a theory.'

Doggles wiped a greasy hand down the front of his shirt, glance nervously over at Bernice. 'I'd just like to remind you,' he insisted, 'what happened the last time we interfaced our level of technology with someone else's time field. There are still all kinds of weird temporal fluctuations around here.'

Benny pointed at his machine. A bloody great backpack full of complex, and more importantly very heavy, technology that they'd had to carry up five flights of stairs.

'Turn it on.'

'Look,' he continued, 'if you can make a time-fold painting in the first place, you have to have a better grasp of temporal theory than we have.'

'Just turn the machine on, Doggles.'

'It's not even finished yet. I'm not even supposed to be doing this stuff.'

Jason elbowed him softy in the ribs. 'But you can't resist a bit of physicy dabbling, can you, Doggles, old mate? And we need to shake this thing out and get a proper look at it.'

'All right,' the Cahlian sighed. 'In theory, if we instigate a tiny time jump in the vicinity of the picture, I think we can momentarily stretch local time and pull the fold flat, bringing the painting back into normal vision.'

'Get going then.' Jason shoved him and, with a quick glare, Doggles started flipping switches. As he did so, Jason cleared his throat. 'So, Benny-clever-clogs, before the great unveiling, I want your theory. I'm not standing for you changing your mind afterwards when you're wrong and saying that you knew all along the picture was a 2-D shape shifter with a grudge against dads and dancers.'

'Okay, this time-active tricky painting has got to be the most advanced thing in the exhibition, right? As Doggles said, anyone capable of making it knew a fair bit about dimensional engineering. So, why is it smack in the middle and not up the end with the alien and the futuristic? Why isn't it Number 97? Or with the mathematical art?'

'So?'

'So, I reckon it was originally one of the future paintings, and that it was moved and another work substituted in its place. Coincidence is pretty much a standard example of Milchmann's psychotropic period;

it's why I saw Peter's picture, Colophon some huge busters and mead.' Doggles kept on hitting switches, a static charge building in the air. 'I think the Milchmann and our time-fold picture were probably swapped, and then the other Milchmann we saw was moved earlier in the exhibit so that our troublesome work could sit in the middle.'

'Why switch them?' Jason frowned.

'Well, say rather who.'

A rasping hum was building and Bernice had to raise her voice to be heard over it.

'The swap had to be made by Clarinda, she authorised the transhipment of the exhibits, specified their placement here. Here in this particular Gallery with its two levels and special harmonics, and then she died, leaving the exhibition trapped here in red-tape limbo, and that painting trapped at the centre of it.'

'It's going to give', Doggles smeared a greasy palm over his forehead. There was an anticlimactic *plinking* sound.

And a painting fell out of the air, and a man and a woman fell with it. 'Patrick Mason Clive Von Holt III, I presume,' Benny said, 'and Clarinda Von Holt, I rather think you're going to have a lot of explaining to do.'

'Er, Benny' Jason said hesitantly, 'I don't think they can. They're dead.'

'We'll never know, not for sure, but I think we can hazard a guess.'

Doggles was hauling his backpack time machine down the stairs while a couple of medical staff loaded the bodies onto gurney-droids.

Bev wanted a full report, and Benny and Jason were busy trying to get their story straight.

'The picture was more than a creepy glitch in a fold in time,' Benny said. 'According to Doggles's read-outs, it was a real time machine, a painted one. Clarinda used it to jump back in time and kill Patrick, having set up her own dancing alibi.'

Jason nodded, getting into the swing of things. 'Then she got paranoid, unsure of whether he'd done the opposite trick, fearful he might already have travelled to the future to strike at her before returning, unwittingly, to his death.'

'So she decided to ship the exhibition off-world, with anything left of her father's history inside it. Except time machines are tricky technology, and a painted one ever more so. They like a human presence. And she didn't realise that if she feared part of him was always inside the picture, equally so was part of her.'

'And her death?'

'I think she got tired of waiting to be killed, and took poison. Except she was right, and out of the past, her victim appeared to string her

up. I don't think we'll ever know for sure.'

'No?' Jason was looking at the painting.

It showed a man sitting on a park bench, watching some ducks.

The ducks were dying, and on the bench next to the man was a noose. In the background a woman danced out of the forest carrying a knife.

'Turn it to the wall,' Bernice said, 'I've no stomach for art just now.'

The Cost for a Collection

Ian Mond

When Bev was told the news, she didn't believe it at first; she'd only just woken up.

'All of it gone!' Librarian Pascal sobbed on the flipscreen.

'Do you understand me, Ms Tarrant, they've taken it all!'

No, she didn't understand, had no idea what he was talking about.

She might have said as much if Pascal's face hadn't disappeared behind a barrage of pop-up windows; hundreds of call waitings spreading like a virus.

And then Adrian came barging into her bedroom. Not like him at all; always so respectful of her privacy. But when she saw his face Bev knew for certain *something* had happened.

The shit had most definitely hit the fan.

Twenty minutes later, Bev stood in a small annex that had until recently held the greatest collection of chamber pots in the universe.

Now there were only featureless shelves and a small group of academics gawking at the total emptiness of the room.

It was the same across the entire Collection. Rooms that had been overflowing with the impossible, mundane, beautiful, boring, significant, and surreal were all empty.

Here she was, a bloody professional thief, and probably the greatest robbery of the last billion years had happened under her watch. Her credibility was going to plummet.

Worse, in the weeks since the Mesh had died, things had struggled to return to normal. There'd been a threefold rise in security reports, particularly violent incidents, and tempers remained high across the Collection. Bev knew the feeling. Things had been better with her and Summerfield for a long time, but the incident with the Mesh and then her bloody oh-so-superior correctness about the Spiral Gallery had brought all of the old jealousies flooding back.

She could imagine what Summerfield would say when she heard about the theft. She could imagine what the rest of the staff would make of it. When word got out, there was going to be a riot.

Right now her ego was a low priority; Bev needed someone to spin some bullshit for her.

She strode back to her office, opened a secure port on her deskscreen and dialled the number for Jason Kane.

Bev gave Jason ten minutes to come up with a story. To his credit, he only took five.

It wasn't perfect, but it would do. Apparently every one hundred years the entire Collection was spring cleaned by a group of trans-dimensional janitors. Unfortunately, that meant relocating the artefacts into a pocket dimension for a short period while the cleaning took place. By the end of the week, the Collection would be clear of dust mites, voles and leaky bits of reality, and all the artefacts would be back in their rightful places.

'And the janitors?' Bev asked.

Jason lounged back in his chair. 'If anyone asks, just tell them they're invisible. They exist on a different plane of reality.'

'And they'll swallow that?'

'Not all of them will believe it, but it'll give you time. Maybe a week, though I think that's pushing it. Still, should be enough breathing space to track down the artefacts using your –'

'They deactivated the quantum tag.'

She'd said it so quickly, so suddenly; it took Jason a few seconds to react. 'You mean to tell me…'

'Kane, I'm not in the mood.'

'No, no, no, let me get this straight. After all the complaints, all the months it took those bloody drones to tag every piece of the collection and the first time it's called into action it doesn't work.'

Jason burst out into a gale of laughter.

Bev gritted her teeth. 'Look, just get out of my office.'

'Come on, you've gotta see the funny side of this.'

'Really? Do I?' Bev let her anger and frustration spill over; she'd been looking for a scapegoat all morning. The way I see it Jason, I've buggered up royally. All my hard work, all the shit I've been through – I've never been tolerant of anyone, and yet here I am, nodding and scraping and trying to run this insane asylum. And here I go and spend millions of credits on this impregnable, bleeding edge system, and I discover on its first run that the damn thing doesn't even work! So don't ask me to see the funny side.'

Jason's smirk had vanished. 'Okay, fine, I'm sorry.' He started rising from his chair, only to pause halfway up then flop back down. 'How many people do you think had the tech to shut down the tag?'

'I've got no idea.'

'Yeah, well, I'm thinking it's not many. You know, before I came here, I checked the Spiral Gallery. After what happened with the painting, I was hoping maybe they took some of the other artwork. But everything is still there.'

'The Von Holt Collection has a bad reputation.'

'And maybe there's a more plausible reason.' Jason grinned. 'Don't

you get it Bev; the Gallery was never tagged.'

Bev wasn't entirely convinced by Jason's theory. The way she saw it, the thieves, like any professional outfit, had profiled the Collection before making their move. They knew the artwork in the Gallery wasn't something you fooled with; they'd probably heard about how one of the paintings had deposited two cold corpses one morning.

Yet reports continued to come in about other artefacts that remained untouched. All of them recent acquisitions, still sitting on their respective shelves surrounded by a whole lot of emptiness. And not a single one of them had been tagged.

The quantum tags were meant to enable the owners to track their property. It wouldn't have taken much to also enable them as transponder signals for a long distance teleport, though, *if* you'd done it at the drones' point of manufacture.

Kane, the smug bastard, had been right.

Bev didn't waste her time contacting Chester Industries' customer support centre. She went straight to the major shareholder; she still had his personal number from the days when thieving had paid her bills.

When the perfect sculpted face of Lord Chester appeared on the second ring, Bev knew he'd been expecting her call.

* * *

Lord Chester wanted to rendezvous on Garnett's World, a reasonable-sized moon orbiting a large gas giant. A consortium of stinking rich people, including Chester, had terraformed the surface into a den of iniquity and vice.

Bev had considered letting Adrian know where she was heading.

But she knew he'd start playing the alpha male, pointing out obvious shit like: *you're walking straight into a trap*. And he would growl, bare his fangs and try and stop her from going. They would argue, possibly come to blows and when the dust had settled Adrian would force Bev to take him with her.

But he'd only get in the way.

The rules of the game hadn't changed for a thousand years, and she knew damn well they wouldn't for another two thousand yet. She was expected to go alone.

She left a note for Adrian. It didn't tell him where she'd gone, only that if she wasn't back in 24 hours they could assume she was dead.

Bev imagined if she did survive, she'd be returning to one very pissed off Killoran.

Everything turned to shit the moment Bev landed on Garnett's World.

Lord Chester and his mob didn't bother with foreplay. She was met at the spaceport by a well-dressed man in a navy suit who immediately knocked her unconscious with a stun gun.

Now she stood in a large, elegantly appointed boardroom, her body still aching from the stun blast. Glass cases lined oak-panelled walls, each one brimming with the sort of knick-knacks Brax found fascinating. It all seemed pretty ordinary to Bev: amulets, ancient swords and bits of weathered parchment. But one case caught her eye, an exhibit of a life-size bicycle made entirely out of glass.

For some reason the bike evoked a single childhood memory, her mother making a sandwich, spreading butter on bread, gently laying down slices of cheese, slicing the bread apart with a sharp knife –

'I wouldn't stare at it for too long. Nostalgia can be a killer.'

Bev blinked, a tear escaping down her face before she could wipe it away.

'Do you want a tissue?'

She focused on the source of the voice; an obese man seated at the head of an antique mahogany table. He was a poster child for the repulsive with his long, greasy hair, fleshy face pockmarked with acne scars and patchy beard struggling to hide the folds of his chin.

Beady eyes stared out from a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. He wore a high-collared tunic, deep red with gold piping around the neck. The sweat-stained fabric strained against his bulk. Another mint and it'd rip apart taking him with it.

The four men and four women sitting on either side of the fat man were a study in contrast. They were all beautiful people – a room of Lord Chesters with their perfect faces and perfect bodies and perfect silky red tunics.

And, like Lord Chester, it was all propaganda. The facade dropped away as soon as they sized Bev up, licking their lips, sneering and giggling.

Bev ignored them. 'Where am I?'

'This is the main boardroom of the Collector's Guild. My name's Ori, Chairman of the Guild, and it's just brilliant to have you here.' He motioned at an empty leather chair. 'Make yourself comfortable. Can I get you anything?'

Bev sat down. 'How about everything you stole?'

'That's what I love about you, Bev –'

'Ms Tarrant to you.'

'Yeah, whatever. Anyways, what makes you so damn interesting, *Bev,* is that you don't fart around. Know what I mean? You're not the patient type.'

'I don't care what you think. I want the Collection.'

'Why do you want it?' Ori asked.

The question caught Bev off guard. ‘Because it wasn’t yours to take.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ Ori waved his hand dismissively and leaned forward.

‘But what’s your *real* reason, Bev.’

‘How about you tell me what gives you the right to steal it?’

Ori stroked his beard, flakes of dandruff falling to the table like snow. ‘Did you know that Irving was a founding member of this little Guild of ours? He was actually part of the original sub-committee that drafted the Guild’s very first constitution more than two thousand years ago.’ He flicked some dandruff from the collar of his tunic. ‘Shame about him dying and all that.’

‘He’s not dead.’

The Guild members tittered.

‘Of course he isn’t.’ Ori smiled. ‘Look, it doesn’t matter whether he’s dead or not, the fact is Irving has absconded leaving you in charge. And we in the Guild are pretty angry that he’d hand over his Collection to someone who doesn’t know the first thing about what it is to be a collector.’

Ori rose from his chair, waves of fat rolling across his belly.

‘Look,’ he said, doing a ponderous circuit of the table. ‘I’m a clone of the original Ori who collected trading cards during the early twenty-first century. He would spend all day collecting and dealing, collecting and dealing and then, one day, he won the lottery – over twelve million dollars – and he took his collecting to a whole different level.

‘And the thing is, Bev, all the while he never forgot what it was to be a collector. Falling in love, spending time with the family, even being a decent person, it all paled next to the need, the desire, the obsession to collect.’

Ori stopped a foot away from Bev. Now she could clearly see the greasy film of sweat on his brow, the brown splotches on his tunic and the slivers of something godawful between his little green teeth.

And the stench, *my God the stench*, like an abattoir on a hot summer’s day.

‘The thing is Bev you simply don’t have those credentials. That Collection you look after… *did* look after, was just a job to you. A favour to a man who helped you out when your life wasn’t going so great. And since Irving has gone you haven’t made one serious acquisition.’

Ori leaned closer and Bev flinched… except she couldn’t move, or, for that matter speak… something was constricting her throat.

Panic overwhelmed her and she squirmed as his lips brushed against her left ear. ‘The moment you sat down a small force field was activated. I’ve just increased the intensity.’

He began stroking her hand, his palms sticky. ‘I’ve been watching

you Bev, through Chester's little drones.'

Now his hand was slowly moving up her arm, touching her gently, barely making an impression on the fabric of her shirt. 'They wanted to take the Collection straight away but I begged them to give you a chance.'

Now he was touching her face, wet fingers lightly stroking her cheek. 'But you let me down Bev. You're an embarrassment to all things collectible.'

And now he was ambling back to his chair, like nothing had I happened, like it was business as usual.

Bev felt the force field subside. She knew what she wanted to do, but controlled herself. There would be a time, and for now, her focus was the Collection.

'What do you want?'

'Why would we want anything from you, Bev? Don't know if you've seen the headlines, but we –'

'Cut the crap. You brought me here to deal.'

Ori sighed. 'Okay, fine, what we are asking for is a simple exchange: the Collection for the Quire.'

Bev laughed. 'You must be joking.'

'Why the surprise, Bev? They're easily the most valuable thing the Braxiatel Collection has ever seen. Oh yeah, Irving knew an ancient artefact when he saw it, but the Quire… Do you have any idea how unique they are? Mysterious, enigmatic, cryptic. And from the far future to boot.'

'And you're gonna lock them up in glass cages.'

'You're gonna capture one of them for us and we're gonna eat it.'

Not for a second did Bev think Ori was joking.

'Don't look so horrified. One of the privileges of being on the board is having the chance of chowing down on unique species. Usually we're talking species on the brink of extinction, but with the Quire – well they're something altogether more exciting.'

'Why not just grab one of them when you took everything else?'

'Smart buggers. Careful.' Ori shrugged his shoulders. 'They'd notice the drones, wouldn't they? But they won't suspect you.' From below the table he produced a stun-gun. 'It's loaded with a quantum pellet. Once you tag one of them they'll be transported straight here.'

'So, I give you a Quire, you'll give me the Collection.'

'You don't get it do you, Bev?' Ori said. 'It's the Quire we always wanted. Stealing the Collection was just a way of getting your attention. Look I've seen the holo-vids; I know the Quire drive you crazy. Are you really gonna shed tears if we have one of them for lunch?'

'And you think I trust someone like you.'

‘Not really relevant, is it? Thing is, Bev, the thing you’ve got to understand is you don’t have much of a choice. If you decide not to take this offer, we’ll simply find another way of getting our hands on them. We’re collectors; we know how to get our hands on things. Professor Summerfield’s boy, maybe.’ Ori sat back, sausage-sized fingers resting on his belly, completely in control. ‘You’ve got 24 hours, Bev. After that, you’ll never see Irving’s Collection again.’

On her return, Bev spent an hour in the shower, scrubbing, scrubbing, scrubbing. Thinking about the time, waiting for the moment.

Very little had happened while Bev had been gone. The cover story had been accepted, with most people just annoyed they hadn’t been warned of the spring clean. And no one had noticed her absence… well other than Adrian who’d left a few hundred messages on her flipscreen. She sent him a short response: *Another 24 hours. Then I’ll explain.*

Professor Summerfield’s boy. She couldn’t tell him. He’d go insane.

After her shower, she sat in her bedroom scanning the footage of the Quire. She’d shown these holos to Adrian early on, hoping they might figure out what made the Quire tick. But all they saw was a disturbing mixture of the childlike, the incoherent and the insightful.

Just when you thought you had them figured, they’d do something insane, like ripping apart an ancient manuscript, only to spend the next six hours sticking it back together again.

Bev was looking for the weak link in the group.

When they weren’t driving the staff mad, they’d spent most of their time in the guest quarters, at least in the early days. Now it was a bit different, and in some respects, more difficult.

Dorso still spent a lot of time being the world’s worst mother with Incunabula. Colophon would be crowded by students and beer every night in the JCR. After his failed venture in security, Rubric stayed within the apartments most of the time. And Verso was practically joined at the hip to Parasiel.

The one exception was Bifolium. The only one she’d come close to liking in the ten months they’d been on the Collection. For a short while after her ultimatum, he’d been the one to show the way. But then something had happened – the footage had never shown any hint of what – and he’d become less and less sociable. Either walking the gardens alone, hugging the shadows, or running riot with idiotic games. Like his obsession with Dr Khalifa.

Walking the gardens alone.

Bev hadn’t even needed to choose a target. He’d chosen himself.

The next morning Bev strode into the Hall of Mirrors to find Dorso standing by her office door. Her arms folded, hands hidden deep in a

flowing robe. Bev froze. She couldn't possibly know what she was planning, could she?

'What do you want?' Bev pushed past Dorso, into the office, eyes scanning the room to see if anything was out of place.

'The janitors don't exist.' Dorso's voice was cool and soft. She followed, gliding into the room behind.

Bev sat down at her desk. 'What?'

'A very poor ruse. The clan would like to know what you have done with the Collection. I would like to know.'

'Are you calling me a liar?'

Dorso's face remained emotionless. 'Obviously.'

Bev's hand went to the right pocket of her trousers. Maybe Bifolium wasn't the target after all. 'Please leave my office before I do something we will both regret.'

'Such as killing Bifolium.'

Oh shit

Bev went to draw the stun gun – a quick draw, one shot, then it would be over – only Dorso's hands flew from their cover beneath the robe. Only they weren't her hands, but long writhing tentacles that snapped out. A single barb embedding itself in Bev's gun arm and it was frozen.

The remaining tentacles coiled before Bev, warning her not to call security.

'We study the way of things. Ms Tarrant. We watch, we observe, and while the actions you have wrought have caused us much distress, more than any of the others I can still see.'

Bev looked at the tentacles. Hypnotic, swaying, writhing.

'Why Bifolium?' Dorso asked. 'Because he is the weakest. And I can see that he is the weakest and I know that you watch us –'

Like the tentacles. Bev realised. Interchangeable for hands. And the eyes. All those different eyes that could see anything. The whole EM spectrum. All of the surveillance cameras.

'– and I know you understand Bifolium the most and I can see that the Collection is gone.' The tentacles curled, then in a flash withdrew.

Dorso removing the sting from Bev's gun arm. She stood calmly before her, the writhing hands calm at her side. 'The Collection disappears, you follow and, on your return, spend hours studying your recordings of us. I can see the pattern. Ms Tarrant. I want to know about the Collection. Where is it?'

Bev smiled. She had no doubt that those tentacles could kill, but Dorso didn't want that. The feeling was coming back in her arm already. That meant she had an opportunity.

'How about I show you?'

‘Twenty four hours, Bev, and yet we don’t see any Quire. Don’t tell me you’ve had a change of heart?’

Ori and the other Guild members had dressed for the occasion.

Beautiful pinstriped suits with wide lapels and flowing velvet dresses with plunging necklines. Even Ori looked vaguely presentable in his white ruffled shirt and cravat.

‘Not at all.’ Bev had also come dressed to impress. She wore her best charcoal suit, and beneath the jacket a cream coloured v-neck.

A canvas bag was slung across her right arm.

She slid the bag from her shoulder, placed it on the mahogany table. From the inside pocket of her jacket she removed a silver disc.

‘Not thinking of doing something silly, are you?’ Ori asked.

‘Your wonderful guards searched me before I came in here.’

Bev activated the silver disc and slid it toward the centre of the table. A cone of light shot from the disc, revealing a holographic image of Dorso strapped to a chair in Bev’s office, tentacled hands writhing. Ori shrugged his shoulders. ‘We’re so not interested in seeing your bondage –’

‘Just watch,’ Bev said.

Dorso appeared totally unfazed by her predicament. From the shadows a holographic Bev emerged, holding a laser knife. Dorso didn’t pay her any attention, didn’t seem to care. Even as Bev started slicing off her hand at the wrist, even as the flesh sizzled and popped.

Dorso just sat there, not a whimper or a moan.

Once Bev had finished removing Dorso’s hand, the holographic projection vanished. She retrieved the disc and slowly walked back to the canvas bag.

‘Okay, great,’ Ori sounded disappointed. ‘You brought the hand. You’re playing a dangerous game here, Bev.’

‘Maybe,’ Bev said. ‘But I know the rules as well as anyone. I’ve brought a sample so you don’t go home disappointed; in the meantime, I want fifty per cent of the Collection now, with the rest on delivery.’

‘No negotiations, Bev.’

Bev held the canvas bag to her chest. ‘No yummy hand.’

The Guild members turned their attention to Ori, they didn’t seem impressed. Ori took a deep breath. ‘Twenty per cent.’

‘Thirty.’

‘All right,’ Ori said through gritted teeth. ‘Thirty per cent.’

Bev smiled; slowly removing Dorso’s severed appendage from the bag, the tentacles limp, ragged and red around the severed wrist.

Barely able to hide his hunger, Ori clapped his hands together.

From a doorway sandwiched between two glass cases, a butler appeared. Small and portly, the butler pushed forward a trolley

carrying a carving knife, a silver tray and nine porcelain plates. Bev wondered how long he'd been standing behind the door, on call for these special, gourmet moments.

The butler glided across to Bev, carefully lifted Dorso's hand, then moved over to Ori. He carved a sliver of flesh from the hand, serving it on a porcelain plate. Daintily, Ori picked up the slice of meat. He licked his lips, pausing for the anticipation to grow, then swallowed the small morsel down.

His reaction was immediate. 'Oh, that was so good, so damn tasty.'

He turned to the other members of the Guild. 'It's what we expected my friends, more than we expected. Very unique flavours. The biomass is most definitely not from this time period. It's steeped with future history.'

The Guild members all turned their eyes to the hand, now sitting on the silver tray at the centre of the table. Hungry, ravenous.

'And, my fellow members, the hand seems to be clear of toxins or –' Ori gasped, his eyes widened, his face turned a deep red. 'No…' he chocked. 'I'm detecting a poison, insidious… hidden… fatal… that bitch has tricked us!'

Bev's heart rate went up a notch.

Ori clutched at his throat, seemed about to topple over –

– then exploded into a gale of whooping laughter.

'Come on, Bev,' he said. 'We've been eating extinct species for hundreds of years; all of us here have built an immunity toward diseases you've never heard of. I mean come on, give us some credit.'

'Can't blame a girl for trying.' Bev said.

Ori shook his head. 'You just don't get it, do you? There was never a way out of this for you.' Bev watched silently as the butler started serving the Guild members. 'You see, Bev, we've got all the bases covered. I mean, nice try and all that, but you'd lost before you walked through the door.'

Bev didn't bother holding back her anger. 'I suppose this means you're going to start selling the Collection.'

Ori licked his greasy lips. 'Stuff the Collection, these Quire are more delicious then I ever dreamed. After we get ourselves the whole set, we'll keep three for ourselves and sell the rest on the market. God, their value will be incredible, just think of all the cool stuff we'll be able to collect.'

'You asked me a question last time I was here.'

'Did I?' The butler served Ori another slice of Dorso's hand.

'You asked me why I wanted the Collection back.'

'Oh, yeah.' But Ori was more interested in his food.

Bev continued talking, ignoring the groans of ecstasy coming from the Guild members. 'At first I thought it was all about losing

credibility with the staff and the academics. No one would ever forget that I lost the entire Braxiatel Collection.

'But last night, I had an epiphany. You guys were right. I'm no collector and I don't care about acquiring artefacts or figuring which bit of ancient pottery is more valuable. What makes my job worthwhile, what gives me a buzz is watching how others react to the Collection. That's something worth protecting.' Her voice turned to stone. 'Which is why I can't let you guys have Dorso, and that's why one of you will be dead in three minutes.'

It took a few moments for what she'd said to sink in.

'Come on, Bev,' Ori wiped his fingers on a napkin. 'What did I tell you? You can't play us, you can't bluff us, you can't beat us.'

'Tell that to the poison you just ingested. One of you will be dead in less than three minutes.'

Ori sighed. 'Do I need to explain again how our bodies are immune –'

'Not this poison,' Bev cut him off. 'That's the problem with you guys. You're all so damn smug, so sure of yourself, you never considered the possibility that I might actually be pulling the strings.'

Her voice became more strident, she could feel the blood rising in her face.

'The Quire aren't the only future boys around here, you know. I'm from the fifth millennium originally. I got dumped here a decade back, and no matter how opulent you think your time is, let me tell you something: it's a dump. A dump I had to survive in, to make a career from nowhere in using stone knives and wooden clubs and doing anything I had to in order to get by. And more than anything, more than those two thousand years I've got on you, that's what makes me dangerous.

'And that's why you guys were screwed the moment I walked through that door.'

A ripple of uneasiness spread across the Guild members. They all dropped their napkins together, they all turned their eyes to Ori and they all waited for his response.

'Do we need to kill you Bev? Has it really come to this?'

'The Quire should have been the clue,' Bev said with a winning smile. 'They really can get to me, but the body parts? Very useful. Those tentacles can synthesise any number of toxins, poisons no one in this time period has ever encountered. The poison you detected was the bluff. I didn't see why we needed it at all, but Dorso argued you might detect something wasn't right.'

Ori started laughing. 'Bev, you're one hell of liar. For a split second there I almost took you –'

And, before he could finish his sentence, the woman to his right

screamed. Her face bulged and twisted, bones punching through pale white skin. Gore spattered the Guild members either side.

The woman whimpered, then fell face forward onto the table with a muted crunch. Blood spread across the surface, pooling against the tray and the last scraps of Dorso's hand.

'That's the real poison,' Bev said.

Anarchy ensued. The Guild members, jumped from their seats, leather chairs overturning, moving as far away from the corpse as possible. They turned to Bev, horrified.

One of the men made a move for her. But Bev – oh so in the groove – whispered a single word of command under her breath.

The man moaned in pain, his face distending, cracking. He dropped to his knees, collapsed under the table. His leg jerked once, twice, then stopped.

'Anyone else want to have a go?' She was breathing heavily, adrenalin soaring.

Ori raised his hands as if warding her off. The confidence had vanished, no longer in control. A pathetic fat man, in a frilly white shirt. 'Stop… please stop…'

'The thing is I'm not sure I can.'

Bev strode over to Ori, pushing her way through the frightened Guild members.

'You see the poison is sort of sentient.'

She whispered again.

'It takes only my commands.'

Ori whimpered as his right hand, the one that had touched her, started to ripple and bulge.

'And I can do whatever I want.'

His pinkie popped like an over-ripe cherry… followed by his ring finger… then his index finger…

'So why would I want to stop?'

And when all the fingers were gone, the rest of his hand dissolved in a burst of bone and blood and pale pink flesh.

Ori collapsed to his knees, voice hoarse from screaming, cradling his bloody stump.

The other Guild members giggled in delight, enjoying the show.

'You have six hours to return the Collection.' Bev murmured another control command under her breath. 'In the meantime the poison will remain latent, and it'll remain so unless a single artefact disappears under mysterious circumstances.'

Ori looked up at her, his face twisted in pain. Only minutes ago he'd been king of his little world, and now he was begging her for mercy.

This is what she'd come for.

The money shot.

When she returned home Bev found Dorso in her office. She didn't bother telling off the Quire for entering without permission. She did, however, make a mental note to add a sub-routine to the surveillance systems; one that notified her any time one of the Quire went near their big box of body-parts.

'Thank you,' she said.

Dorso inclined her head. 'Your gratitude is not necessary. Please do not lie to us again.' And she left the office as arrogant as ever.

But this time it didn't bother Bev one jot.

She spent that night in bed with Adrian. She told him everything; about the Guild, about Ori, about how he'd hurt her and she'd hurt him in return. She tried not to cry; because she liked to be strong in front of Adrian, even if it didn't actually matter to him. But in the end she cried a bit anyway.

And he stroked her, and they kissed and they fell asleep in each other's arms.

Bev woke later that night. It was July but, even given the season, the weather was far hotter than it should have been. None of that was the cause for the sweat on her back, though.

She quietly opened her flipscreen. There was a message from Mahalia: the Guild had returned everything.

Were you really a member of the Guild, Brax? How could you allow them to become like that? Didn't you keep your eye on them? Didn't it bother you? Didn't you care?

She remembered the feel of the force field holding her down. The smell of his flesh, the wet texture of his hands. She remembered. She cared. So she altered the frequency on the flipscreen, a channel that only connected to one thing.

And whispered a single command.

Then she closed the screen and turned back to Adrian's soft fur and fell immediately asleep.

Lock

Kate Orman

The Morning

Wajiwaj and Peter were riding their trikes on a brand new concrete floor when they found Incunabula. They heard her first: crying like a baby, all by herself. Her big see-through egg was leaning against the side of the workers' toilets, and the inside of the egg was all fogged up from her tears.

They got off their trikes and stared at her. She stopped crying for a second and looked back at them. Then she started up again.

Wajiwaj looked like an octopus with a pair of elephant feet coming out from under it. His head was a really disgusting grey-pink, and squashy like a bag full of goo; sometimes he would let you squeeze it and make him make faces. His feet were grey-blue. Wajiwaj just stood there like a rock, his three leopard-spotted eyes following his friend as Peter walked up to Incunabula.

'How did you get here?' he said. She only wailed even louder.

'Maybe they put her here because she was crying.' Wajiwaj poked at the egg with one of his tentacles.

'I think she's here by mistake.' Peter bent down to lift up the egg. 'Let's take her back to the other Quires.'

'We should get a grown-up,' said Wajiwaj vaguely, looking around.

'We're not supposed to be playing here,' said Peter. Mummy had warned them to stay in the park; they'd only been able to get past the barriers because of Wolsey's ID tag. 'Oof! She weighs a ton!'

'What about the trikes?'

'Just leave them.'

'We'll get in trouble.'

'Will not. Will you come and give me a hand!' That made them both giggle. 'I mean a tentacle.'

Wajiwaj stretched out several tentacles from his face and hefted the egg from the other side. It took them a couple of minutes to get it balanced between them properly, but they only dropped it once.

Luckily it didn't break.

'We're rescuing you,' Peter told Incunabula. 'So stop crying.' She didn't. 'Come on. You're making my ears hurt.'

Wajiwaj had sucked most of his tentacles back into his head, too, so he didn't have to listen to her. 'Where do the Quires live?'

Peter started to shrug, but instead he said, 'Dunno. I'll ask Mum.'

By the time they reached the hamlet, Incunabula had stopped crying, at least. Wajiwaj said, 'I'll stay out here with eggs-on-her-legs.'

Peter sighed. 'I promise you won't get into trouble.'

Wajiwaj was kind of unusual because he talked a bit. The grown-ups from Phaaag Zenbrou almost never said anything. They just stood there like big pink and blue trees and waved their tentacles around a lot, which was another kind of talking. Wajiwaj had learned to talk out loud by hanging around with humans – in fact, his voice sounded a bit like Peter's.

They lumbered up the stairs and put the egg down as soon as they could, in the front hall.

'Whew,' said Peter.

Wajiwaj squeezed all his tentacles back out, listening. 'Is your mum-dad here?'

'Yes, she is.' They both jumped guiltily and turned around. Peter's mummy was standing in the doorway of the flat, staring at Incunabula. 'There'd better be a good explanation for this, Peter.'

'She was lost,' said Peter at once.

Benny crouched down by the egg and touched it with a fingertip.

'Lost? You can't exactly go wandering off by yourself, can you?'

'Well they must have left her there,' said Peter.

'Where, exactly?'

Peter mumbled something about the building site.

Mummy nodded and stood up, looking mad, but not with him or Wajiwaj. 'Did they really just *leave* you there by yourself?' she asked Incunabula, who was sucking on one of her own toes and said nothing. 'You'll be safe enough here until I drag your mum back by her collar to take you home. Boys, you'll stay with her, won't you?'

Peter and Wajiwaj fidgeted, but said nothing.

'Good. I'll be back as soon as I've given Dorso a sufficiently large piece of my mind. First, though –' She crouched down and her face became very serious. 'Peter… I want you to give me Wolsey's tag back.'

'Oh, *MUM!!!*'

'It isn't safe for you to go exploring right now.'

'You're not fair!' Peter clutched at the tag on his coat, holding it tight in his fist. 'You said I could have adventures!'

'And some day you will again, sweetheart,' she said. He *hated* when-you're-older! 'It's only for a while. But… a few odd things have been happening. I don't want you getting caught up in anything dangerous.'

Mummy was thinking about the night a few weeks back, when Peter had had the nightmare and in the morning everything outside had been broken. Mummy had told him she'd taken care of everything, but she didn't sound like she believed that now.

‘There wasn’t anybody at the building site,’ Peter said.

‘What about our trikes?’ said Wajiwaj. ‘We left them there.’

Mummy blew angry air out of her nose. ‘I’ll bring them back for you later. That’s if nobody’s stolen them.’

‘Stolen them!’ said Wajiwaj.

‘I told you – people are behaving in odd ways at the moment. You have to be careful.’ She looked at Peter. ‘You shouldn’t be getting your friends into trouble, either. Your tags protect you, both of you – they make sure you stay where it’s safe.’

‘I promise I won’t go anywhere any more I’m not allowed,’ said Peter, desperately. ‘Wajiwaj promises too.’

Mummy just held out her hand, looking a bit sad. Peter considered running for it and hiding the tag, but it wasn’t going to be any use.

Wajiwaj only had to cope with one parent, and he had four.

Miserably, he opened his hand. She undid the tag from his jacket and gave him a kiss on the cheek. ‘Thanks, sweetheart. Stay put.’ And she was gone out the front door.

Wajiwaj and Peter looked at one another. Wajiwaj said, ‘I thought you said we wouldn’t get in trouble.’

The Evening

Peter didn’t think there was anyone in here. It was a big, warm room, filled with strong smells he didn’t recognise. There were tables and chairs – it was a kind of restaurant – he saw a counter at one end which would be where you ordered the food. There were games! A whole row of them along one wall. He’d need to get a chair or something to stand on to play them.

Peter froze. Wajiwaj’s mum-dad was behind the counter. He was polishing glasses with a bunch of napkins held in his tentacles. Yuck!

Peter made up his mind he wasn’t drinking anything in this place.

The grown-up hadn’t seen him. In fact, Peter could walk along right next to the counter, and Wajiwaj’s mum-dad wouldn’t be able to see him over the top of it.

He was examining a vending machine that sold rude things when he felt a rope go round his waist, and the next minute he was up in the air. It wasn’t a rope, it was some of Wajiwaj’s mum-dad’s tentacles. Euw! Peter was going to grab them but he didn’t want to touch them.

‘Put me down!’

The next thing he knew he was on the counter. Another tentacle reached past him to push some stuff out of the way. Peter sat down awkwardly on the wooden surface, legs dangling over the edge. He wiggled forward, to jump down, but the big alien was in the way.

They looked at each other.

‘I’m going to eat you, little boy,’ boomed Wajiwaj’s mum-dad.

‘No you are not,’ said Peter. ‘All you eat are leaves and sometimes anchovies.’

‘That’s only what young Zenbrouli eat,’ said the alien. ‘In our adult phase, we need to eat a great deal of meat.’ His tentacles poked and prodded at Peter. ‘Good, crunchy bones. You’d make a tasty snack.’

‘You’ll get in trouble. My mum’ll kill you.’

‘Look around,’ said Wajiwaj’s mum-dad, rolling his-her spotty eyes. ‘The place is empty. When I eat you, nobody will even know it was me.’

‘That’s not funny,’ said Peter. ‘Anyway I told my mum I was coming here.’

‘But children aren’t allowed in here. How did you get in?’

‘My mum gave me her ID tag,’ lied Peter.

‘Do you know *why* children aren’t allowed in here?’

‘Why?’

‘BECAUSE I EAT THEM UP!!!’

Wajiwaj’s mum-dad grabbed for Peter with his-her tentacles.

Peter grabbed two of the tentacles and tied them in a knot.

‘Ow!’ trumpeted the Zenbrouli. ‘Ow, ow, ow!’

Peter jumped down from the counter and ran for the door, looking back to see if the monster was chasing him. He ran right into someone’s legs. ‘He was going to eat me!’ he shouted, pointing at Wajiwaj’s mum-dad, who was saying bad words and trying to untie his face.

The legs turned out to belong to Uncle Jason, who was laughing his head off. Peter felt himself being lifted up again, but this time it was Mummy. Peter clung to her. ‘Help!’

‘I should let him eat you!’ she said. ‘After the fright you’ve given me! Jason and I have been looking for you for an hour!’

‘He has your ID tag, Professor,’ said Wajiwaj’s mum-dad. She-he had untangled the knotted tentacles, but was left with a nasal-sounding voice, which made Jason start roaring with laughter again.

‘I thought he might. When I went to fetch mine, I found his tag in its place.’ Benny put Peter down. ‘Hand it over, young man.’ Peter was still too freaked out to argue. ‘Now apologise to Jenjawin.’

‘Other way round!’ protested Peter.

‘Yeah,’ said Jason, wiping tears from his eyes. ‘Talk about grievous bodily harm.’

‘I was only trying to give the lad a scare,’ Jenjawin assured them, still trying to smooth out his crumpled tentacles. Peter scowled up at the alien. *People are behaving in odd ways.* Mummy had said.

Something in those spotty yellow eyes still looked hungry to him, made him think that Jenjawin was telling a lie. The alien face was like

a mask, he thought, you couldn't tell what she-he was really thinking.

Mummy gave Peter a nudge with her knee. 'I'm sorry,' he said grudgingly.

'So am I,' said the Zenbrouli. 'Shake?' She-he extended a tentacle.

Peter took it gingerly. 'Ah, let's not either of us mention this to Wajiwaj.'

Mummy waited until they were walking home, her and Jason each holding one of his hands, before she started her lecture. 'That was a daft thing to do, Peter. For one thing, I was stuck without my ID tag – I couldn't even come looking for you.'

'Luckily, I wasn't busy,' said Jason smugly. 'Otherwise she'd probably have found you snoring behind a pile of shot glasses and ash trays.'

There was a brief spate of muttering above Peter's head.

'For another thing,' said Benny, when she and Jason had finished exchanging words, 'You could have run into something much more dangerous than Jenjawin.'

'Other way round!' said Jason, squeaking in an imitation Peter voice. He and Peter both started giggling.

Mummy said rather loudly, 'Why the bar, Peter? Why go there, of all places?'

Peter shrugged. 'I was just exploring. It was the first place where the door opened up.'

Uncle Jason said, 'You can't blame him, y'know. He gets it from you.'

Mummy said, 'I know you were angry when I took Wolsey's tag away. But trying to punish me back was wrong, and so was running away.'

'I didn't!' protested Peter.

'Don't lie to her, kid,' said Uncle Jason. 'She has x-ray eyes that can see right inside your skull. I know all about it.'

'I really didn't! I didn't want to get back at you and I wasn't running away.'

'Well, what were you up to, then?'

'When Jenjawin said he was going to eat me, I knew he must be one of the dangerous people. But I never see them. They're only where you go. So I thought that if you only had my tag, then you'd be safe too.'

Both grown-ups stopped walking. 'Oh, sweetheart,' said Mummy.

Jason swung Peter up on to his shoulders. Mummy looked up at him. 'Don't you worry about me, Peter,' she said, very seriously. 'I'll be all right. Your mum is pretty dangerous herself. No one's going to hurt any of us, because I'll stop them.'

'Okay,' said Peter, from his perch.

Jason said, ‘We’ll all stop them. We’ll leave ’em tied up in knots. Ow! Kid, don’t grab my hair!’

The next day Wajiwaj stomped around the courtyard waving his tentacles at everyone. ‘I’M GOING TO EAT YOU UP!’ he hooted.

Everybody pretended to scream and laughed and ran away – even Peter.

Perspectives: The Injured Party

Philip Purser-Hallard

'No, I am not going to bloody apologise!' Benny shouted. 'Why should I? She's the one in the wrong!'

'Okay, okay,' said Jason hurriedly and (he hoped) soothingly. He raised his hands in a placating gesture, realised it looked like he was expecting her to punch him and dropped them again. Leaving himself wide open if she did punch him, of course.

'Don't apologise, then,' he said. 'Your choice, absolutely. Forget I mentioned it.'

'There's no alternative,' Bev had told him. 'She'll have to apologise.'

'No problemo,' Jason declared. He drank his coffee down to its dregs. 'Just leave it to me.'

They were in Bev's office, dazzled by early morning sunshine streaming through the leaded windows. Bev had broken out some seriously good coffee from Brax's private stash – even now, she said, she kept finding stuff he'd squirreled away about the place – and Jason was feeling gloriously mellow and at peace with the world.

'I'm serious, Jason,' Bev said. Underlining the point with her serious voice.

'If I can't get the Quire to withdraw this complaint, it's going to cause all kinds of problems. There are enough tensions between them and the academic staff as it is. That isn't what worries me most, though.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'No?'

'Some of the academics could take their side against Benny,' she said.

'People still think of her as Brax's protegee. Nobody likes the teacher's pet, especially once teacher's left the room. They resent her going off on her jaunts while they're stuck here with awkward students and vanishing collections. This place isn't a cosy common room any more, Jason. Benny has enemies here.'

'Right you are,' he said magnanimously. 'I'll have a word with her.'

'Bev put you up to this, didn't she?' Benny said accusingly.

'No, of course not,' Jason said. 'Well, you know. Yes. It's just that –'

'Just *what?'* she barked. 'I only said what everyone's been thinking. She needed to be told.'

'I know, I know.' He stopped himself in time from doing the hands thing again. 'Just… maybe not in front of all those people, you know?'

It had taken Jason completely by surprise. They'd been at yet another bloody reception, this one for the Puissant Lord Penhaligon of Parch. An August reception for an august person, he'd told Benny to a deafening silence. His Lordship was thinking of endowing a chair, or donating some artwork, or maybe using his influence with the Draconians – it could have been any of the above, Jason left all that sort of thing to those in the know, especially when there were wine and sausage rolls on offer.

Benny had been quiet earlier on in the evening – probably worrying about Peter again, he guessed. She'd been doing that a lot recently, since the business with the ID tags. He lost track of her early on in the proceedings, after he'd accidentally got talking to the busty redhead who turned out to be the Protector of Puissant Lord Penhaligon's Privy Purse.

'Try saying that three times quickly when you're drunk,' he suggested.

Rather less wittily than she seemed to believe, judging by the inordinate amount it made her laugh.

He weighed up the double-entendre potential of 'privy purse', before deciding that it might be a bit advanced for her. She obviously didn't have as much up top as down in the bosom department. Presumably his Lord High Muckiness was employing her for The Usual Reason.

They flirted and bantered for a bit before he went off to restock with little cheesy things on sticks.

He'd hoped that Benny was just off enjoying herself with somebody else, until the shouting started.

* * *

'Look, Benny,' he pleaded with her. This is me, okay? I'm on your side. You know that. I mean,' he added awkwardly, 'you do know that, right?'

She glared at him. She wasn't shouting, though, which had to count as progress.

'Look,' he said again, 'we'll sort this out. You don't want to apologise – I mean,' he corrected himself hastily, '– you don't think you ought to apologise. Fine, that's your call.'

'I should bloody well think so,' she snapped.

'But there's still this whole… *thing*, that needs resolving somehow. I guess we just need to look at other options.'

'Options? What sort of options had you in mind, exactly?'

Jason welcomed the sarcasm. It meant she was starting to work this through her system. Getting some distance from it all. 'Erm, I don't know,' he said. 'That was about as far as I got, really.'

He'd known her a long time now.

'Perhaps you think I should *pretend* to apologise,' Bernice suggested brittlely. 'Tell Dorso how sorry I am for puncturing her fat inflated ego-balloon, but secretly *not actually mean it.* How would that be?'

‘It’s a thought,’ he said. Adding quickly. ‘One that would only occur to a rampant maniac, obviously.’

For a while there was silence in the bedroom, broken only by the clicking of Peter’s latest game of Perception next door.

‘Oh… *buggeration,’* Benny said, and burst into tears.

‘You thoughtless cow!’ a somewhat blurred voice was yelling, Jason recognised it, with a leaden feeling in his gut as that of his (technically ex-) wife. ‘How could you abandon that poor child like that, then act like it doesn’t matter! How do you think that made her feel? How do you think it made my son feel, when he found her there?’

Apparently, since she and Jason had parted company earlier, Benny had been sampling the various fine vintages on offer.

He began pushing his way through the nearby guests. Already knots of rubbernecking academics were gathering salaciously.

‘Really, Bernice.’ Dorso’s voice was level, clear and scornful. After all the cultures you’ve encountered in your career, is it really so far beyond your comprehension that my clan might have different parenting techniques from your own?’

‘Parenting techniques?’ Benny shouted incredulously. ‘You left your daughter alone in tears – on a building site – because of some bloody childcare theory?

‘She isn’t my daughter, you ignorant little bitch,’ said Dorso calmly ‘She isn’t anybody’s daughter.’

‘That isn’t any bloody excuse!’ Bernice was incandescent. ‘She’s still your responsibility! She’s still your child!’

Jason finally reached her side. Bernice stood alone, her personal space grown in proportion with her fury.

Facing her, Dorso was surrounded by silent clansmen, some of whom looked less than happy to be protecting her. Verso for one looked terribly distressed.

Bifolium clearly thought it was hilarious.

‘Come on, Benny,’ Jason suggested breathlessly. ‘It’s time to go.’

He took her elbow gently, but she yanked it away.

‘This has nothing to do with you!’ she slurred. ‘This is about my son! Just get back to that woman and her breasts, why don’t you?’

‘You need to take her home, Jason,’ Dorso said. ‘It’s clear that she’s intoxicated.’

Benny pulled herself up in a drunken exaggeration of pride. ‘I’m going,’ she said. ‘Believe me. And I don’t need him *to take me anywhere.’*

She stalked off through the crowd, leaving Jason gazing into the massed faces of the Quire.

‘Erm. Sorry about that,’ he said.

It wasn’t really about Peter, was it?’ he said, passing her a tissue from

his side of the bed. ‘Not in that way. He wasn’t upset when he found Incunabula, just concerned for her. It wouldn’t have occurred to him that Dorso was being neglectful. That age, you think whatever adults do to kids is normal.’ As usual he veered away from that particular mental territory. ‘lt wasn’t about Incunabula either. I mean, not that you were wrong about all that – Dorso was out of line. Totally. But, I reckon you were actually thinking about you and Peter. About how people see the two of you. Am I right?’

He looked at her. Next to him, Benny was sobbing silently.

Of course, she wouldn’t want Peter to hear.

‘Talk to the other Quire about it,’ he’d advised Bev sagely, when she first aired the problem. ‘Buttered toast, mead and wenches aside, Colophon’s a decent enough bloke. Can’t he get Dorso to drop it?’

Bev sighed. ‘He was the first person I talked to. He can’t be bothered, basically. He says Dorso’s making a fuss about nothing and they all know it, but there’s no talking to her when she gets like that. He seemed to find it funny I’d even asked. And then he called me “little lady” again.’

‘Verso, then. She gets on with Benny.’

‘She’s too wrapped up in Parasiel to care,’ said Bev. ‘Look, Jason, I do understand why Benny lost her temper. The Quire are bloody difficult sometimes, and Dorso’s the most annoying of the lot. Well,’ she added after a moment’s thought, ‘one of the more annoying. Of the six of them.’

‘Too right.’ Jason sipped his coffee. It really wasn’t bad at all. ‘So, what were you wanting me to do?’

‘People don’t think that,’ he said, ‘I promise. Nobody could believe that you neglect Peter. I mean… God, we all know how much you love him. It breaks your heart to leave him here every time you go away. I know that, Adrian and Bev know it, I bet you anything Peter knows it too. You’re only doing what you have to.’

‘Dorso can spend all the time she wants with her,’ said Benny indistinctly into his shoulder. ‘She has that with Incunabula, and she doesn’t even care. Hell, what *bloody stupid* names,’ she marvelled, suddenly angry again.

‘Bloody are as well,’ he said, and patted her supportively. ‘I know,’ he went on. ‘You don’t want to keep leaving Peter behind, of course you don’t. It stinks that you have to. It stinks that you have to leave *me*, frankly. But you do it. You do it because you’re a good mother, and because you’re a good… erm, ex-wife. You’re a good *person*, Benny.’

‘Bollocks am I,’ she said, and blew her nose.

Silence again. Then the familiar avalanche sound of cascading blocks.

‘I’m going to have to apologise to Dorso, aren’t I?’ she said,

eventually.

'Pretending works,' he said.

Just leave it to me, *he'd said. All in a day's work for the Jason Kane Diplomatic Corps.*

Even as her office door closed behind him, Bev had her doubts. But she didn't have the time to finesse this. Let Jason do what he could, and if she had to pick up the pieces later, so be it. She had too much on her plate right now.

Bev opened up the folder entitled 'Quire – Official Complaints', and marked the Summerfield-Dorso file 'Pending Resolution'.

Then she turned to the next item on the list.

Oh, dear God. Bifolium, Dr Khalifa and the squid in the bath.

She opened up a channel and put through a call.

Mother's Ruin

Dale Smith

It was dark and probably cold, although Benny thought she was shivering more from the idea than from any physical sensation.

Everything felt muted around her, as if someone had turned the volume down on her home. But something was wrong, and she knew it. Something didn't feel right.

She crept out of her bed and hopped onto the tricycle she kept nearby. Something was definitely not right. She couldn't hear Peter.

Perhaps that had woken her; some maternal instinct which troubled her even in the deepest sleep.

As she pedalled across the ravine that separated her room from Peter's, a large werewolf bobbed out of the darkness and doffed his hat to her. Benny made a mental note to add that to the list of things she kept in her diary headed *1,000,000 Things To See Before You Evolve Into A Being Of Pure Energy*.

'Hello,' the werewolf said. 'Are you looking for Peter? He's through that door. Didn't you know?'

Benny felt an acute stab of guilt: how had she forgotten? In her hurry to make sure her son was okay, she was actually moving further away from him. Of course that door was his: what had she been thinking? She dismounted her tricycle in an instant, which – as these things often do – had turned into a rather grumpy looking fish.

'Don't mind me,' the fish said in a depressed drawl. 'I'm just a red herring.'

Benny put her hand on the doorknob and froze. The shivering got worse as she realised that on the other side of the door was the most terrible thing in the universe. Her son.

She turned the doorknob very slowly.

'Don't come in.' It took a moment for Benny to place the voice, and then she felt guilty because it was clearly Peter's. 'I'm not finished.'

'Peter?' Benny said. 'Are you okay?'

'I'm not finished!'

The door opened with a slow creak, and on the other side was only darkness. She looked to the werewolf for comfort, but his face had grown feral: a human face was starting to push out through his muzzle – and that was angry with her too. Benny jumped through the door and shut it behind her without a second thought. Her heart pounded.

Then she remembered she wasn't alone.

'Peter?' she said softly. Her heart wouldn't slow. 'It's Mummy.'

There was a little hunched shadow in the corner of the room. It was trying to hide itself in an empty room.

'Peter? Don't be afraid.'

She reached out a hand to her son.

Peter spun around suddenly, holding out his hands to his mother, begging for her help. Benny couldn't help but gasp: where his hands should be, there was nothing but clear, unblemished skin. His arms ended at the wrist with two smooth stumps.

'I'm not finished,' he said.

Then he leapt at her, his sharp teeth sinking into flesh.

Jason, being Jason, had a hard time understanding but did his absolute level best to look sympathetic. He almost – *almost* – made Benny feel better about it all: and at least he never said, *Well, it was only a dream, wasn't it?*

'There's bound to be a few weird feelings floating around in there,' was his gambit instead. 'You know, considering.'

'Thank you Doctor Freud.'

Benny looked over to where Peter was happily playing Perception again, the pieces spread out around him. It sounded like a pessimist's idea of an early learning toy: a game that taught you how to keep standing after your heart had been ripped out.

Bev and Adrian had both agreed that Peter could stay with her for the next couple of days, while she was back on the Collection. She should probably count herself lucky they weren't calling child services after her practical demonstration of the Freudian principal of transference, with Dorso as unwilling assistant.

Not that she needed an excuse to spend time with her son. Or permission. Jason was playing Perception like it was the most exciting artefact in the whole Collection, but he was probably just pleased he'd managed to avoid answering the boy's questions about the birds and the bees (and the Cahlians and the Killorans).

Benny couldn't take her eyes off Peter's little hands.

'But you know what I mean,' countered the King of the Snappy Comeback. 'After everything that happened when he was born.'

Benny didn't like to think about it: stuck in a Fifth Axis prison wondering who was dead and how long it would be before she joined them. There couldn't be a worse way to bring your child into the world – except maybe water-birth.

'I mean you know he's not to blame,' Jason continued, 'but some part of you still thinks he was trying to kill you anyway.'

Stop. Rewind.

'I'm sorry?'

Benny moved as fast as her own personal drag factor would allow: her

left hand was in Peter's, and her right was in the hand of a young girl whose name she had only just managed to decipher between the sobs. Both scuttled along as fast as their legs could carry them, which was still considerably slower than Benny's could carry her. The little girl looked up with sea-green eyes, and the tide was clearly in.

'Not far now,' Benny encouraged. 'Promise.'

Peter looked up sulkily: he would rather be back at home playing, but this was their 'quality time' and they were going to spend the time even if the quality was rapidly going downhill. Benny told herself that one day he'd thank her for being able to come up with some justification for why he should one day thank her for this.

Benny pulled up sharply and knocked on the door.

'Come,' came Bev's voice.

Benny tipped a wink at the little green-eyed girl.

'Now don't worry if the nasty lady talks to you like you're a five-year-old,' she said softly. 'She does that with everyone.'

Bev looked over her glasses at Benny, with a look that said *I heard that.* Benny smiled back a thin *You were meant to*, and let her eyebrows flick an *Aren't we good at subtext?* for good measure. Behind Bev, an eighth-sized representation of the Quire's quarters hung in the air: Benny had interrupted one of Bev's spying sessions.

'Can I help you?'

Bernice knelt down to bring her eye-to-eye with the sniffling girl.

'Now, Louisa,' Benny said softly. 'Why don't you tell Bev what you told me?'

Louisa looked up at Bev and said in a heartbreaking whisper:

'Mummy tried to hurt me.'

Bev put aside the papers she was shuffling, and raised an eyebrow at Benny. Benny remained stoic.

'And what's your Mummy's name, Louisa?' Bev asked.

'She's Anne Howkins' daughter,' Benny said helpfully.

'Okay: when did this happen?'

'When I was sleeping.'

'Last night?'

Louisa didn't answer, just nodded a few extra tears out. Bev's face set hard, and she reached out for the intercom on her desk.

'Where is Anne now?' she asked Benny.

'Leading a viability survey on Heritage.'

'When does she leave?'

'No,' Benny shook her head. 'She's leading it now. She left two weeks ago, and isn't due back for another four.'

Bev looked up at Benny incredulously. Benny smiled back as innocently as she could.

'You interrupted me for a child's nightmare?'

‘Not just hers: I had one last night too.’

‘What have I told you about pickled eggs before bedtime?’

‘Yesterday Colophon was attacked because someone thought he was trying to give birth to a demon. And Jason seems to think that I nearly died giving birth to Peter,’ Benny caught sight of Peter’s face, and hurriedly added: ‘Which I didn’t and is just a very silly story and nothing to get upset about.’

Bev’s hand was still hovering over the intercom.

‘Are you thinking of calling security on me? I thought Rubric had turned in his uniform.’

Bev moved her hand, but not particularly quickly.

‘No offence, Bernice, but if Jason told me my name, I’d double check it,’ Bev said, in her calmest negotiating-with-a-lunatic voice.

‘And the Quire have been rubbing people up the wrong way since they arrived. I don’t see what I’m supposed to be worrying about.’

Benny leant over the desk and whispered very quietly to Bev. She’d already given Peter a million things to have nightmares about outside the Collection, but there was no way she was letting him worry about anything inside it as well.

‘Something strange is going on, Bev,’ she hissed insistently. ‘Five women have reported to security that their babies tried to kill them. One pregnant woman ran – and I mean ran – to the doctor’s to beg him for a caesarean because her baby was killing her from the inside. And if that wasn’t enough, will you just look at that?’

For a moment, Bev gave Benny a look that said ‘If you think I’m falling for that…’ – so much so that Benny was tempted to go with it and run away as soon as she turned her head. Then Bev remembered the hologram behind her. Inside, a miniature Dorso was sitting in the middle of their quarters hugging Incunabula tightly to her chest whilst two of the other Quire paced around her impotently.

INCUNABULA: Incunabula want to study the maths men!

DORSO: No! You’re not going. You can’t leave me! Don’t go!

Bev took a moment to digest that, then flicked the pause button inset on her desk. As she arched her fingers in front of her face, Benny knew this wasn’t going to go her way.

‘Perhaps she’s feeling guilty after your little outburst?’ Bev said, archly. ‘Guilt can make even the worst mothers try to be a *little* dutiful.’

Benny set her jaw firmly.

‘And then there’s the little things. People who might not have been the best of friends but agreed it was in everybody’s best interests to try and get along, are sniping at each other like schoolgirls,’ she said through clenched teeth. ‘Something is going on, Bev.’

Bev’s eyes were hooded. She nodded slowly.

‘Yes, I can see that,’ she hissed. ‘But I wouldn’t worry, Bernice: I can look after the Collection, and if anything untoward is going on, I will put a stop to it. If that’s all?’

Benny took her hands off Bev’s desk, and held them out to the children.

‘Come on, Louisa,’ she said, turning her back on Bev. ‘Let’s get you back to your grandfather.’

They didn’t get more than five paces before Bev called out to them again. Her voice was so chilled, Benny could’ve dropped it into a glass and had it with gin and a slice of lemon.

‘I didn’t know you were so friendly with security, Bernice. Do they often report to you behind my back? I’ll bear that in mind in the future.’

Benny muttered something darkly under her breath.

‘Mummy,’ said Peter gravely. ‘Isn’t that one of the words Uncle Jason says you shouldn’t say in front of me?’

He didn’t get an answer.

Benny knew that the right thing to do would be to step back and take a deep breath. There were plenty of people who could deal with this sort of thing just as well as she could: this was her time with Peter, and after all the disruptions of the past year (all his past years, if she told the truth), she owed him at least one perfect day playing kites with the Avians in the memorial gardens. No matter what the provocation, Peter came first, even above the Collection.

Okay, so what if – despite years of attempting to show otherwise – Bev wasn’t actually as much of a bitch as she’d acted today. And so what if ‘unexplained character changes’ was just below ‘holding your finger to your ear and then contradicting what you’d just said’ in Benny’s top ten of signs someone was under an outside influence?

Bev really did have the Collection’s best interests at heart, she was sure. In fact, Benny wouldn’t put it past her to sell her own grandmother to make sure Braxiatel’s disappearance didn’t affect business as usual.

And people putting the Collection first was exactly what had got them into this mess in the first place: definitely spend the day with Peter.

‘Mummy?’ Peter said, looking up at her.

Benny smiled, and made her mind up.

Peter smiled too, but it was a strange smile. Well, not the smile itself, but the way it suddenly seemed to make him a good few inches taller. And a couple of years older. And all of his hair a good four inches longer. And Benny knew she was being a bit dense here but in her own defence who would have expected their own child to grow a

couple of years older as you were looking at them?

'They always said you'd grow up fast,' she said.

'Mummy?' Peter said again, the smile replaced by a frown.

He growth spurted again, and suddenly she was faced with a Peter who must have been just entering his teens: Benny felt her stomach lurch as she considered the years she'd lost with him. She reached out to him and took his hand: it felt exactly the same, warm, furry – just bigger. He looked at her as if he was embarrassed to even be breathing the same air as her.

'Mum!'

'Don't be afraid, Peter,' Benny said. 'Everything's okay.'

But it wasn't: he aged another ten years even as Benny's mind raced through the possibilities. His clothes were changing as he aged: okay, what did that mean? If he was physically ageing, then his clothes would as well and they'd quickly fall off him as rags. If his clothes were changing, then more likely she was the one skipping down his timeline.

'Bernice! What are you –' a forty-year-old Peter in a caftan said before suddenly ageing five years.

Okay, a localised time distortion, which meant that Peter – her Peter – was fine, somewhere. Okay.

'Don't worry Peter,' she said, 'this will soon be over.'

'Bernice,' he answered. 'Mother. I knew you'd come.'

Peter was lying on the floor now, looking like the past two hundred years had decided to pop in and say hello to his face. His fur had turned a cold steel grey, and his eyes were rheumy and white. He lay on his back, each breath rasping out of him. Benny knelt down beside him and placed her hand on his chest. He gripped it tightly with a gnarled hand, and then was gone.

'Peter –' Benny didn't know what to say.

'Yes, Mummy?' said the toddler standing before her.

When they'd got home, Benny had put Peter straight down for a nap, wishing that she could join him. Instead, she removed a pile of dirty laundry covering her flipscreen and put a call through to Doggles.

There had been a brief pause, and then his face had appeared on the screen looking somewhat flustered. If she'd been calling anyone else, she'd have been worried that she had interrupted something, but the grease smeared across his forehead told her the only hot date he had was with something mechanical.

Which of course didn't necessarily –

'Doggles,' she said. 'Those gravitational fluctuations –'

'All cleared up,' he replied curtly. 'Hass sorted all that out. Whatever other trouble he caused.'

Benny shook her head. The last thing she needed to do was to think about that again.

'Are you sure?' she asked.

'Nothing in the past few weeks.'

'And did you check for temporal anomalies at the same time?'

'Not routinely,' Doggles wiped his brow and frowned. Another greasy smear found its way onto his skin. 'What's up?'

Benny told him. To his credit, his eyes only widened a little.

'Okay. I've got some things that I might be able to do. They'll take a bit of time, though. Have you told Bev?'

'I don't think Bev's herself right now,' Benny said. 'I'm betting that whatever's making everyone round here so touchy is getting to her more than most.'

Doggles snorted.

'Bev grumpier than usual? I can see why you don't want to talk to her.'

'It might be better if we sort this out on our own,' Benny said. She couldn't keep her eyes on the screen – they kept wandering over to Peter's room. 'Maybe it's some other effect of the time corridor.'

'I thought I'd sorted all that out,' Doggles said, 'but it –'

He was interrupted by a loud klaxon.

Benny did her best to persuade her morning orange juice to stay nice and safe inside her bladder. Then Bev's face appeared on the screen, and Benny had to switch her attention to keeping her lunch down.

'Beverly,' she smiled sweetly. 'What a pleasant –'

'Bernice, be quiet,' Bev scowled. 'I've been monitoring your conversation, and –'

'You've been what?!'

'I mean it Bernice,' growled Bev dangerously. 'Don't push me on this. I heard you conspiring against me – against the Collection – and I'm not going to tolerate it.'

'I wasn't conspiring, you stupid cow!'

'You're under house arrest until further notice. After everything that's happened…' Bev looked like she was tasting something particularly nasty. 'Don't expect any leniency. This is unforgivable.'

'Bev?'

'Yes?'

Benny tried to stop herself. She honestly did.

'You really *are* a grumpy bitch, aren't you?'

Bev glared, and the viewscreen went black. Benny savoured her small victory, until her doors and windows automatically locked themselves.

Benny sat cross-legged on the floor, nodding encouragingly as Peter placed one block after another, and trying not to let him know what she was thinking. He had lived through enough horrors without having to know what his own mother was planning for Bev Tarrant.

The front door suddenly clicked unlocked.

Benny sprang into a cat-like crouch.

'Don't worry, Peter,' she said. She looked around for something she could use as a weapon. 'Stay there.'

The door opened a crack, and then stopped.

'Benny? It's me,' said Adrian, from safely behind the door. 'Please don't throw anything.'

'Is Bev with you?' Benny asked. She'd found a heavy and ancient ???????? that would probably hurt a hell of a lot.

'No,' Adrian said.

Benny sighed, and dropped the ????????.

'Okay. Come in.'

Adrian poked his furry head around the door and smiled warmly.

He should really be congratulated that it only came out looking half like a snarl.

'Daddy!' shouted Peter excitedly.

'Bev could've come herself to apologise,' Benny said as Peter was swept up into his father's embrace. 'I would've only hurt her a little.'

Adrian looked at her strangely.

'I'm sorry, Benny,' he said. 'Bev sent me to pick up Peter. She doesn't want you looking after him at the moment.'

Benny picked up the ???????? again.

'What you have to understand, Benny, is that Bev's been under a lot of stress recently,' Adrian was saying in an infuriatingly calm voice.

Like he was chatting to a crazy woman. 'After everything that happened with Mordecan, and the Collector's Guild and all this stuff with the Mim –'

'– she decided she'd give up on sane and give crazy a run for its money?' Benny wasn't in the mood to hear any of this again. 'How can she believe I'd do anything to hurt the Collection?'

'I'm sure she –'

'And Peter?' Peter looked up from Adrian's embrace, and then nuzzled sleepily back into the fur. 'She thinks I'd hurt my own son? Our son?'

'Of course she doesn't. She's not herself.'

Benny looked at Peter, hugging his father. Even though this was their time together.

'I work hard trying to make this work, Adrian.'

'Benny, you're shouting,' he replied in that infuriatingly calm way.

Benny gave Adrian her coldest stare.

'I know. I'm angry. People shout when they're angry.'

'You're frightening Peter.'

Benny swung an accusing finger out at Adrian, and only felt mildly guilty as he flinched. The Killoran stood, placing himself gently between his son and Benny.

'Don't you dare,' she spat. 'I'm the one who has to look after Peter. I'm the one who has to come running back from being out there just to make sure he's all right. I'm the one who has to put up with everybody judging me for leaving him behind in the first place.'

'Bernice.' Adrian growled softly. 'I think you should calm down.'

'Why does everybody seem to know what I should be doing except me?' Benny scowled down at Peter, hiding behind his father's legs.

'Go on: take him. Bev knows what's best for him, she can have him. I can get back out there, doing what I do. Having my own life!'

Peter looked up at her and smiled awkwardly.

'It's all right. Mummy,' he said gently. 'I know you have to go away sometimes. So that you can come back. Hass explained.'

Benny grabbed for her son, so fast that even by the time Adrian had his hands on her, Peter was already in her arms.

She hugged him, so tightly she wouldn't have been surprised if his head had popped.

'Peter. I'm sorry,' Benny tried hard not to sob. 'I don't know where that came from.'

'I do,' said Doggles.

Benny looked up at the viewscreen.

'What's going on?' she asked.

Doggles shrugged.

'Oh, you know: the usual,' he said. 'We're all going to die.'

The Deep Galleries had been off-limits for a few months now, ever since the gravitational shifts had started. Benny had never been sure just how well charted they were, it was the kind of thing Brax would have done and never told anyone about. All she knew was they were light and air-filled, but without any obvious signs of how it was being done. Which was typical Brax: they'd only know about it if it stopped working, and they wouldn't have a clue how to fix it.

'How much further?' Benny hissed.

'There's no need to whisper,' Adrian said. 'I doubt there's anybody else here.'

'Listen: I'm a trained archaeologist – when you're exploring caverns, you whisper. How far?'

'We're nearly at the area Doggles indicated.'

Benny nodded, and let Adrian take the lead. She wouldn't normally

have brought him, but she'd needed someone to hot-wire the lift.

They still had no idea what they were going to do when they arrived, but Benny was sure some kind of solution would present itself. Or it wouldn't, and they'd die. But at least Benny could add '*See new universe being born*' to her renamed list, *1,000,000 Things To Do Before You and Your Home Are Destroyed By Universes Being Born.*

'There seems to be something strange going on inside the planetoid.' Doggles had said over the viewscreen. 'The gravitational fluctuations were only the start of it: there's temporal distortions popping up all over the place, and lots of other stuff I haven't even got the equipment to monitor. Best guess is there's a ton of pocket universes forming down there. If any of them reach maturity, the gravitational forces alone will rip the Collection into tiny pieces.'

And guess who had been volunteered to go down and take a look.

'I don't think we should have left Peter with Jason,' Benny said.

Adrian didn't look round.

'Peter understands. You heard Doggles: the proto-universes seem to be affecting people as well as space. You noticed it yourself.'

'I didn't mean that. I was worried about Jason dropping us in it.'

'Jason is very trustworthy,' Adrian said.

Without any sign of a speaker, a tannoy bing-bonged into life.

Will Ms Bernice Summerfield and Mr Adrian Wall please cease their attempt to destroy the stability of the Collection and make their way to Ms Tarrant's office for reprimanding. Thank you.

'Very trustworthy,' Benny sighed. 'You should go back.'

Adrian shook his head. The tannoy bing-bonged again.

Will Ms Bernice Summerfield and Mr Adrian Wall please be aware that they are both bastards and they will shortly be apprehended by the Grey Regiment. Thank you.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

'Who are the Grey Regiment?' Adrian asked.

'Elite archaeologists,' Benny answered, shaking her head. 'They get sent to digs in disputed territory. Bev had them seconded here after the business with the Collector's Guild, just in case.'

'I'm sure we can handle them.'

'Two of them were sent to search for the missing link in Skarosian evolution last year. They found it, and came back. In one piece.'

'Shall we hurry?' Adrian said.

* * *

'We're getting closer,' Adrian said solemnly.

'Are you sure?'

'I've just seen my dead grandfather.'

'Okay.'

The air was greasy and difficult to breathe. Benny wondered vaguely whether it was whatever atmosphere Brax had installed down here failing, but somehow couldn't summon the energy to worry about it too much. At any moment, the entire planetoid could crack in half and disintegrate: it put things in perspective.

'I think this is it,' Adrian said.

'I think I worked that one out for myself.'

The fog started to clear, and Benny could see they were walking down a narrow walkway of rock, with two vast ravines either side of them. Each ravine was glowing with light, a multitude of stars burning inside them, all different shapes and sizes, each within a clear shell. She was reminded of Incunabula inside her hollow egg – and for good reason, she supposed. Each of those glowing stars was a baby universe waiting to reach maturity.

'It's beautiful,' Adrian breathed.

'Meh,' Benny shrugged. 'You've seen one vast universal womb…'

'I envy you, Bernice.'

'If you mention the blessing of motherhood, I'll shoot you myself.'

'With Peter. I envy you.'

Benny managed to pull her eyes away from the proto-universes long enough to give Adrian a strange look.

'You get to have him nearly every day,' she spluttered.

Adrian smiled gently. 'But only you get to be his hero.'

Roll up, roll up, ladies and gentlemen. Come and see something you may never see again: Professor Bernice Summerfield, rendered speechless.

'We should have had more, you know,' Adrian continued, looking out at the misty eggs beneath them. 'You and me. We should have tried harder to make it work.'

Benny took a step back.

'I don't think even Doggles and a working set of sonic screwdrivers could have got me and you working,' she said warningly. 'We both know you're better off with Bev. You actually make her half-bearable.'

'But Peter deserves brothers and sisters,' Adrian said calmly, like he wasn't talking fluent crazy. 'Thousands of them.'

'This isn't you, Adrian,' Benny said firmly. 'It's this place. It's –'

She spun around, and suddenly she wasn't there any more.

'… survival of their kind had to take priority. Do you understand? That was what was… that was everything,' came a familiar voice.

Benny looked around her. 'That was more important than any individual.'

She recognised the place almost immediately: she was in Brax's study. And she wasn't alone.

'And then, a few years ago, I realised the same thing,' Brax said to

the student sat in front of him: Parasiel. She'd had another timeslip.

'There are things… dark things, events… that happen. They threaten us. They threaten our very survival. It happened to my own people and then… it happened to us.'

Oh, no.

'Us?' asked Parasiel. 'The Collection?'

Benny knew when she was.

'The Fifth Axis and their… their leaders. I couldn't… There are things coming, Parasiel. We've word from Thuban that the Draconians… I won't let it happen again,' Brax was shouting now, flecks of spittle falling onto the student's face. 'Do you hear me? I won't let it happen again! So… so I made the decision to do something… something that I wasn't meant to do. Something that would ensure our survival.'

And he had. He'd tried to set up his own private army of Cybermen to protect the Collection at all costs – costs that seemed to include installing Jason as an easily controlled Cyber-Controller. From this distance, Benny could almost feel sorry for him: it was somehow easier to see that he'd never really recovered from the occupation.

That he was still in pain. It was easier to forgive now that no one was in danger and his obsession for security couldn't hurt them.

And then he'd been discovered and vanished. His rooms vanishing with him, as if they'd never existed. Like nothing she'd ever seen, or at least not since…

'Brax!' Benny yelled. 'You stupid –'

And then she was gone again.

'– bastard!' Benny yelled.

Adrian looked at her with a very strange look on his face. Benny took a quick look around her: she was back in the cavern with the glowing stars.

'Benny,' he said hollowly.

'Not you. Brax. He's a stupid bastard,' she spat, looking around her for something, some familiar sign. 'But it makes sense. It fits. Why didn't I see it? The time jumps, the reconfigurations, even Doggles and his bloody time corridor messing up. I forgot the first rule of archaeology: don't let stupidity blind you to the facts…' She rubbed her forehead, 'He told me, months before he left, he told me. I even told Bev. Shifting the Collection into another dimension. How do you do that? How could you do that?'

Adrian hadn't moved. Benny grabbed him by the shoulders, and spun him so he could see what she could.

'Don't you see it?' she yelled. 'Brax merged his timeship with the Collection!'

There was a small hexagonal panel beside them, blended into the rock.

'He must have thought it would protect us if we were invaded again. But all the mother and child stuff – that's what all these are, these universes: a thousand timeships waiting to be born. The Collection's children,' Benny shook her head in disbelief. 'Maybe he didn't even know. No, I'll bet he did. I bet he was doing something to keep it in check and never bothered to tell us.'

'Bernice!' Adrian shouted. 'I jumped in time.'

'So did I. Are you not listening?'

'I jumped into the future,' Peter said. 'And I saw myself being shot.'

And at that point, Adrian was shot.

Benny shouted out his name even as the stun bolt crackled into his shoulder. He tumbled heavily into her arms, knocking her down to her knees even as she spotted dark shapes starting to gather around her: the Grey Regiment. They paced forwards cautiously, weapons raised, bar one in the middle of the group who was already taking measurements of the timeship babies.

Benny didn't know what annoyed her most: that they were going to shoot her, or that they were more professional archaeologists than she was.

'Don't move,' warned the leader.

'Run,' whispered Adrian.

Benny knew who she trusted more: she ran.

The lead archaeologist didn't hesitate: he barely flinched as he fired, and seemingly couldn't have cared less if his shot hit Benny square in the back, or missed her entirely and set up a bizarre ricochet chain reaction that caused all of his colleagues to be fatally injured. Luckily for him, it was the first option and not the second.

Unluckily for Benny.

The impact pushed her forwards even before the pain hit, and she lost her balance completely.

Benny fell into the pit of timeships.

And the universe stopped.

As she fell, she could hear time whistling in her eardrums. Her own personal time, passing by at a rate of a year a metre: she saw herself growing older and more distinguished (this was her vision, and she was going to interpret it her own damned way), saw the adventures getting more exciting, and then slowly drying up. She saw herself as an old woman sitting at home, waiting for her sons to arrive and say hello. Peter and Keith: it was that future, then.

For a brief moment, she saw Peter standing there with all his family cutting his mother's 250th birthday cake. There were masses of them

– children, wives, husbands and a few unidentified alien species that might actually be relations. Her great grandson was there, sporting a silver eye that shone whenever his face passed into shadow. The older Peter looked up and smiled at her, as if he'd known she'd be eavesdropping on this particular bit of his life and wanted his mother to know everything turned out all right.

Then she hit, and the universe stopped.

At first, it was like a cross between dreaming and lying in a room stuffed with cotton wool and trying to breathe it all in. Then the mists started to clear a little, and Benny could see a little huddled figure in the corner.

Peter reached out to her.

For just a moment, she recoiled, thinking he was going to have no hands. But there he was, her son, perfect. Because now he was nearly finished.

'Hello, Mummy,' he said.

'I'm not really your mummy, am I?' she answered.

Peter looked at her confused.

'Okay,' Benny said, slapping her thighs. 'First rule of out-of-body experiences: go with it. Hello, Peter.'

Peter smiled.

'I'm nearly done,' he said proudly.

Benny couldn't bring herself to smile. She really wished that the universe hadn't represented itself as her son.

'I'll be fantastic when I am,' he said. 'Won't I?'

'You will,' Benny agreed. 'You'll be a bright new timeship with thousands of brothers and sisters to play with. Anywhere you want to go, all over time. And when you're born you'll tear a black hole into this part of space, and you'll all be able to feed on it and get big and strong. Stop me if I'm wrong.'

'Will you be my pilot?' Peter asked her.

'I don't think so, no,' Benny replied sadly. Peter's face fell a little. 'I don't think there's anyone here to be your pilot. Brax could've, I suppose, but Brax left. And there certainly aren't thousands of him waiting for you. You're a long way from where you should've been born. I'm sorry.'

'I'll be alone?'

'Yes. I'm sorry.'

'Alone. Oh.'

Benny hated herself, but she knew she had to push on.

'And your mother…' she said.

'Mummy?' Peter echoed.

Benny took a sigh, and avoided Peter's eye.

‘When you’re born, your mother will die. You’ll kill her.’

‘I’ll…’ his bottom lip began to tremble.

Benny held out her arms and hugged him tightly.

‘I’m so sorry.’

‘What happened?’ Bev asked.

She looked tired. Benny had gotten used to seeing her scowling recently, and somehow she couldn’t quite handle seeing her worn down like this. It made her feel sorry for her, when really she was looking for a scapegoat to make herself feel better. Perhaps she should blame the Grey Regiment archaeologist who’d dragged her back to Bev, unconscious.

‘We got lucky, that’s what happened,’ Doggles said, wiping his hands onto his trousers. ‘One of the pocket-universes destabilised and imploded. Took most of the others out with it. If it hadn’t… Like I say, lucky.’

Benny didn’t say anything to contradict him.

‘Most of?’ Bev asked.

Doggles looked down at the grease stain on his trousers.

‘I’ve done some tests,’ he said gravely, ‘and I think Bernice is right. Brax did merge his timeship with the Collection. And all of this seems to be part of the ship’s natural reproductive cycle. We don’t know enough about it to stop it, or even slow it down. It’s only a matter of time before this happens again. On the plus side, it explains all those gravity waves. *And* the weather. *And* those time jumps you were experiencing a few weeks back. No more random nudity for Miss Tarrant.’

The silence hung in the air, waving and trying to attract the attention of everyone who was so studiously ignoring it.

‘Well…’ Bev said, eventually. She looked at Benny with a hint of apology in her eye. ‘At least we should be able to get back to normality for a few months.’

‘Will we?’ Benny said, perhaps a touch more aggressively than she’d intended.

‘None of what happened is our fault,’ Bev said, making it clear that when she said ‘our’ she meant ‘my’. ‘The universes have obviously been affecting us since they started to form.’

Benny wasn’t so sure: deep inside she knew that Adrian had felt bad about their break-up and wished it hadn’t happened. It wasn’t his fault – his species were supposed to bond for life. And, if she was completely honest, she couldn’t swear that the feelings the universes brought out in her were entirely alien either…

‘Thank you, Doggles,’ Bev said finally. ‘If you think of anything you can do to fix this, let me know. And if you mention the naked thing

one more time, you're going to be fired.'

Doggles smiled nervously, nodded, and left the room.

Bev looked up at Benny.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

Benny closed her eyes.

'It wasn't you,' she lied. 'But I don't think it was the babies either.'

'The babies?'

Benny cleared her throat.

'The proto-universes. Whatever. Bev, I think it was the Collection. I think it was trying to tell us it was scared, and alone. It wanted us to help it.'

'I'm doing everything I can, Benny –'

'I don't think this is something you can do,' Benny said, resting her hands on top of Bev's desk. 'Timeships like Brax's work with a pilot, and if they're left on their own… We're just going to get more trouble like this with Brax gone, Bev. We need him back.'

Bev gave her a strange look, and then pressed the button on her intercom.

'Brax, could you just step in here for a moment?' she said.

There was a tense silence.

The intercom buzzed.

'Erm. I'm sorry Ms Tarrant,' said Bev's assistant. 'Mr Braxiatel isn't here. He went away.'

Bev fixed Benny with a hard stare.

'Oh, yes, so he did.'

Benny held her hands up.

'All right. Bev, you win! But we need help. The only thing that's going to control this ship, control the Collection is a pilot.'

Bev glared for a moment longer than was absolutely necessary, and then began to nod slowly.

'Yes,' she said. I think you're right. What do you suggest?'

Benny thought for a moment.

'I don't know. I've been thinking about it, though. Turns out I've been thinking about it all year and no one told me.'

Bev frowned.

'My paper on time sensitives,' Benny prompted. 'The one I've been researching? If anyone's going to know what to do with a timeship, a time sensitive would. Or have some idea what we could do to stop all this.' She paused, 'We'll probably need Doggles's time-jump machine working, so some extra funding to the advanced research facility will need authorising.'

'Done,' Bev sighed. 'More trans-temporal shit.'

'Once I've gone through and found a suitable candidate, I think we should make the jump as soon as Doggles is ready.'

‘Good,’ Bev said. ‘Get right on it.’

‘No.’ Benny said.

She thought about falling into a world that wasn’t quite a dream and wasn’t quite cotton wool. She thought about the creature she’d met there, and what she’d told him. She thought about how she would have felt if it hadn’t been part dream. If it had been Peter that she was hugging and comforting and eventually killing.

‘I think I need to spend some time with my son first,’ she said.

Future Relations

Philip Purser-Hallard & Nick Wallace

He was waiting for her. When she prised off the seal and pushed at the doors, when the rain streamed down the window and lightning turned night into day, then she stumbled up the steps to lay the bottle on the desk, he was waiting for her.

She barely even glanced at him. Somehow it just made sense in too many ways that he was here again.

He was waiting like he had in the old days. Immaculate behind the desk, long fingers interlocked, his face a look of constant enquiry. So poised, so still, inviting her on. She reached behind her, found the chair where it had always been, sat down. The thunder and lightning had settled, the only illumination now a needle of light that seeped through the open door. She unscrewed the bottle and threw the top onto the desk; the miniature timpani as it spun to a standstill the only sound.

A single drop of whiskey beaded on its rim.

Some minutes passed. He stared impassively as she drank from the bottle. Her silence was almost a challenge, daring him to say something, but he never moved. As much as possible, she kept her eyes locked on his, the way she used to, the way that always inevitably prompted an answer. But this time, none came.

Finally, she broke away from his stare, looking to the floor, the bottle slack in her trailing hand.

And then she began:

Do you understand love?

I don't know, you see. I don't know whether you do or not. You love me, I think. In some way, you do. You wouldn't have done all this if you didn't care for me and for Peter and all of us somehow. But…

It's not really turned out the way you expected, has it? Not any of it. You told Jason you were sorry, and I believe you. You didn't mean things to happen the way they did, and that's okay. That's human. I can understand that.

Because in some stupid, alien way, you love us.

Merging your timeship with the Collection. What were you thinking, Brax? What was the sodding idea? Worse than that, merging your timeship with the Collection and then running away and not telling anyone you'd done it!

So you tell me, sat there all pristine and serene, your royal bloody ghostly highness, are you pleased with the way it worked out?

This year… it hasn't been exactly what you'd call normal. I mean, I've had run-ins with Bev before, that was nothing new, but talking a universe into topping itself was one for the diary. But then everything's been weird since you left, you know?

When you went… We were dropped right in it. Half the institutes we deal with cut off their ties, some of the students buggered off, more withdrew their applications to study here. And I knew what it meant and I've spent the best part of a year trying to build that reputation back up. So much time away from Peter. All for this place.

The thing is… when you left, it was horrible, but it felt like a release. It's the Braxiatel Collection, right? Your fingerprints are all over it. And even when we didn't see you, we knew you were there. This great benevolent shadow hanging over us. But still a shadow. And when you went, that vanished too. We could be ourselves. Be the people we'd always wanted.

Sometimes you never realise you're in chains until they're gone. Never see what's been happening until it's too late.

You should have seen Bev.

Really.

We'd all written her off, I think. Hired gun, thief, pirate. Someone who'd never really fit in… but she did. I don't think I even knew it had happened, but she changed, Brax. She stepped up. Not shouting or throwing her weight around. But thinking and talking.

She likes this place. It's her home and she cares. I don't think I'd ever realised that. She cares.

I think Adrian brought that out in her.

I'm back to love again.

They didn't even take the body with them, Brax. They didn't take the body.

'Then,' Jason told Benny, 'she said she didn't want them seeing each other any more. And I said, when did you ever want it anyway? You've been a pain in the arse about it from day one.' He forked a slab of golden omelette into his mouth. The conversation kind of deteriorated from there.'

Benny sighed, and sipped her bitter tea. 'As long as she doesn't go running to Bev about it this time.' She'd finished her sandwich too quickly as usual, while Jason was still ploughing through his lunch.

These shared times at Cafe Vosta were becoming ever rarer, ever more precious.

Bernice leaned back, shirt sticking clammily across her shoulders.

The atmosphere had been tense for days right across the Collection.

A minor glitch in the weather-control systems, Doggles had said. The kind of thing to expect when your home turned out to be a malfunctioning timeship.

It pricked her skin like a tropical storm building. Building but never breaking.

Jason shrugged. 'She started it. Anyway, they'll be gone soon.'

Incunabula had spent the night at Benny and Jason's. It had been Peter's idea, naturally, but the Quire had seemed happy enough to go along with it. Verso and Parasiel had dropped the little girl off the previous evening, with a long list of dos and don'ts from Dorso. All had gone surprisingly well, with only a couple of minor tantrums.

Incunabula didn't sleep, apparently, but she'd been happy enough to lie down on the living-room sofa with Peter's cartoons on low. When Benny had rushed off that morning, late for her own lecture, all had seemed well.

That was before Dorso had arrived to collect her charge.

'It was the cheek of her peed me off most,' Jason said now. 'Saying Peter was a "retrograde influence". I said, he may not be so *highly evolved* as yours, love, but at least he knows how to use bloody pronouns. And he doesn't throw a screaming fit every time something doesn't go his way, either.' He pushed his plate away, peered reflectively at the puddings board.

At least the clanswoman had had the decency to talk to Jason out of Peter's earshot, Benny thought. They'd just have to contrive natural-seeming reasons to keep him and Incunabula apart until the Quire finally packed up and left. It wouldn't be much longer now.

She sighed again. 'I hate the way this has all gone so sour.'

Relations with the Quire had been worsening for weeks, as the time neared for the visitors to return to their own era. Worsening to the point that people had even started getting nostalgic for the days when the clan had just stood apart, offering obscure and aloof commentary.

You are experiencing difficulties seemed so much more acceptable when the alternative was Bifolium jumping out at Dr Khalifa from the fountain of Neptune, and then chasing him up and down the water avenue with writhing tentacles in place of hands.

That had been during one of the parti-coloured clansman's more… energetic moments.

Khalifa was in hospital with recurrent panic attacks, and only extensive pleading from the rest of the clan had secured the would-be-comedian's release into their custody. Benny had seen them leading him back to their quarters, head down, avoiding eye contact.

Inside himself.

There had been other problems. Dorso and Rubric were embroiled in protracted disputes with academics whom they'd humiliated, patronised or otherwise upset. A student studying for her finals had had her room trashed by a group of drunken first years, whose shaggy ringleader turned out to be a plastered, six-gun-toting Colophon. Her tutor was furious, and so were her – apparently influential – parents.

At least one professor had a chart on his wall, crossing off the days until they left.

'Ah, well.' Jason shrugged. 'We tried.'

'We did,' said Benny. 'And it really looked as if it was working for a while.'

She finished her tea, and tried to shake herself out of her despondent mood. 'Oh, never mind,' she said. 'Like you say, they'll be gone in a few days. We can start getting this place back to normal again.'

If Jason had glasses, he'd have been peering over the top of them.

'This place is still threatening to birth another universe, you know.'

'Like I said, normal.'

Her voice felt flattened, muffled by those clouds on the horizon.

Always building, never breaking. Threatening an ever-worse deluge for the poor bastards living underneath it all.

We wondered from the start what you'd been thinking when you invited them here. Because they were just so damn weird. And for a bit, we thought we had them figured out. I mean, Verso. Verso could drink. Couldn't hold it for shit, mind, but that girl could drink.

I can read people. Do you remember that? Do you have those memories?

Bernice Summerfield, renowned archaeologist, accidental adventurer, crack shot, lover of girly ballgowns, and, oh yes, expert in body language.

It should have been so easy to see it coming. But it wasn't.

When you did this thing, when you did it to the Collection, you did it for our safety and you didn't see the consequences beyond that.

We all live inside our own prejudices, our own world-view, our own way of thinking. Things get filtered through our experiences and we use them to define the world around us.

So, it doesn't matter what we think we see or think we know. All those details you dig up every day and put together, they mean nothing if you don't strip away those perceptions and just look at things as they are.

Anything else and you're leaving yourself wide open to the stuff that comes from places you can't see. Because you've never thought to look.

You lay yourself wide open. Strip yourself bare.

She wanted to talk. It was that simple. She was a young girl in love and she wanted to talk.

'He loves me, Benny.' Verso's voice was quivering still. 'We love each

other. My clan didn't understand that.'

'I see.' Bernice tried carefully to keep her own voice neutral. This was Parasiel they were talking about, after all.

When Verso had turned up at her door in floods of tears, Benny had taken her in. She'd sat her down with a cup of tea and the giant handkerchief she'd once misguidedly bought for Jason and had to use as a dishcloth ever since. (She'd considered putting brandy in the tea, but decided that vodka – the nearest her study could have provided – could only make matters much, much worse.) It had taken her ten minutes to coax Verso into a state where the Quire woman could articulate her grief.

'Perhaps your family are right, though,' Bernice suggested as gently as she could. They've known you longer than Parasiel, after all. And you'll all be going home very soon now.'

This prompted a fresh bout of sobbing which Benny weathered patiently. Then she boggled as Verso dried her eyes on the handkerchief. At last the Quire woman popped them back in their sockets and went on.

'They wouldn't let him come with us. We could have adopted him. It used to happen, even after the Inspired Revisioning – Oh!' She covered her mouth. 'I'm not meant talk to you about that, I forgot.'

Benny felt an almost maternal surge of pity for the poor girl's naivete. Never mind the other Quire, Parasiel would hardly have abandoned his life here – his friends, his studies, his career prospects – just for some girl. No matter how vivacious, curvaceous and anything-else-acious she might be.

In fact Bernice was mildly astonished that the relationship had lasted as long as it had. But Verso's uncritical adoration was always going to feel like something rather special to someone as self-involved as Parasiel. The clansmen had grown more complex in the months since they'd given in to Bev's ultimatum, but they were still caricatures compared with the complex personalities making up Parasiel's usual dating pool.

'That would have been a lot to ask,' she ventured.

'That's just what Rubric said,' said Verso. 'He said the clan is the clan – alone, intact and entire. Already the clan is wounded by its time here, and it will need a long convalescence before it can rejoin the Macrocosm. Rubric said taking an outsider back to the clanstead could sunder the Quire forever. He said I was being irresponsible and disloyal. He was so *angry.'*

Benny had only understood about thirty per cent of what Verso had just told her, but she had to respect Rubric's good sense. 'And have you told Parasiel?' she asked.

'Not yet. I wanted to prepare. It's such a huge step. I'm scared.'

Bernice patted her shoulder. ‘I know. It seems like a big thing now, but once you’re back home –’

‘Back home?’ Verso blinked at her. ‘I can’t go back to the clanstead. Parasiel and I are one. He’s my clan now. That’s what I told the Quire before I left.’

Oh shit. ‘You what?’

Quickly Verso went on: ‘A clan hasn’t been sundered that way for… oh, for monads. But it was all I could do. If the clan won’t let Parasiel be Quire, then I must be Parasiel. I can learn what he knows, help him to study. We’ll be a student together.’

‘But…’ Verso’s lip trembled again. ‘Benny, what happens if he won’t let me stay with him? Who can I be then?’

I should have spotted it right there, really. ‘Who can I be then?’

I thought she was just being wet – Little Miss Co-dependency. ‘How can I be complete without a boyfriend?’ I get students like that every damn year.

Judging other societies by my own standards again.

I should have realised. Verso defined herself in terms of clan alone. That’s why she asked Parasiel that question, the first time she met him. In my tutorial, right under my nose.

Has your family been significant in your life, Parasiel?

Whatever personality Verso had – and she did, they all did; they demonstrated that amply, and in most cases annoyingly, all the while they were here – it was irrelevant to her. She needed a tribe, a family group she could belong to. She thought we were the same.

That’s the Quire’s filter, the world-view which constrains their view of others. It’s their whole frame of reference.

Our families define us. Parasiel said that to me, afterwards.

He seemed to think it was some kind of revelation.

Parasiel opened his door the instant she knocked. He had a huge soppy grin on his face, which fell to the floor when he saw Benny standing there. ‘Professor S,’ he said. ‘Sorry, I was expecting Verso. A little while ago, actually. Please do come in, though.’

Bev said the Quire never slept, in the footage. Virtually never, anyway. Only heavy indulgence in alcohol or certain other drugs seemed to make it necessary. The only time Benny herself had seen one of the clansmen unconscious had been after the evening she’d spent plying Verso with vodka – and that was what, with certain misgivings, she’d done again.

She stalked in after him. ‘Actually it’s Verso I wanted to talk to you about.’

Benny was always faintly unnerved by how tidy Parasiel kept his poky student room. Books in order on the shelves, sink clean, floor free of any traces of stray underwear or dirty crockery. She always felt

as if she should be nagging him to mess it up a bit, be more like his fellow students. Or indeed his tutor.

'Verso?' Parasiel looked concerned. He was dressed up for an evening out, in a black silk shirt with tiny rainbow question marks stitched to the lapels. 'She is all right, isn't she? I assumed she'd just been delayed by her clan. The Quire can be very… protective of her.'

'And so they should,' Bernice said grimly. 'She's only a kid. Mentally, I mean.'

Parasiel frowned. 'On the contrary,' he said, 'she's extremely intelligent. As you'd expect after millennia of evolutionary and genomic revision. Benny, what's this about?' He sounded, for him, quite agitated. 'Has something happened to Verso?'

'Yes,' she said bluntly. 'You have.'

'I don't follow.'

She let him have it. 'She's been a wet dream come true for you, hasn't she? A cartoon ideal girlfriend who worships you unconditionally, shags you senseless and looks pretty on your arm at parties. No critical faculties, no expectations about men – none of those complicated personality quirks that make dating a proper grown-up woman so… *demanding* for you. She's like an inflatable doll who talks back and cooks you dinner. And your student budget could scarcely run to one of those.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Jealous, Benny?'

It was too much to hope that he'd be at a loss for words. The only time she'd seen that happen she'd been about to bash his brains out with a rock.

'She loves you,' Bernice told Parasiel coldly. 'She *really* loves you, heaven only knows why, and she's intending to leave her family for you and stay behind. Here. With you. In this three-metre-square room, presumably. I'll bet that isn't quite what you had in mind, is it?' 'Oh, my…' Parasiel looked shocked. 'They said no, then?' he said.

'They won't take me back with them?'

Benny blinked. 'Say again?'

'Verso was going to ask her clan if they'd adopt me. We were going to go to their clanstead together, in the far future.' His voice was happy, eager, heartbreakingly young. 'Can you imagine it – making that journey, seeing the posthuman era? Joining a scholar family as advanced, as wise, as the Quire? It would be a glorious adventure. And – well, we'd be together.'

'You…' Benny wasn't sure her ears were working properly. 'You knew that Verso was planning this? You *wanted* to go to the future with her?'

Surprised, Parasiel laughed. 'Well, of course. I couldn't let her go back without me, could I? Benny – Verso and I are in love. We want to

spend the rest of our lives together.'

Parasiel said that. Parasiel.

Just think about that for a moment. Can you think? Can a shadow do that? Then just think about it. Parasiel, the cocky little sod. The arrogant bugger. The great intellectual and wonderful ladies man – providing the lady in question is young enough to still have her head turned by a solid grounding in Descartes. Parasiel, in love.

You're not moving, which is a shame. Because I'd have thought that idea alone would be enough to frighten the dead.

I know it scared the crap out of me.

I can do a spot of Descartes myself. I can talk you through the excavations under Olympus Mons, or the sacrificial tombs of the Bug Emperor. I'm getting older, and more responsible, and I've changed way too many nappies.

But relationship advice?

Sweet and holy, I married Jason, for pity's sake, Jason. What the bloody hell was anyone doing coming to me for relationship advice anyway?

And… well, this was Parasiel, remember. It's not like he's never tried it on with me. And he's never had a relationship last more than a fortnight.

And I've sat through all those tutorials, and I've read all those looks in the faces opposite him while he sits there pontificating, and although I've not seen it, I'll know what's happened. Turns their heads, gets his jollies, and then he's off.

I thought I knew him, see.

In love? Him? It was just another bloody fling.

And there's Verso, wanting to take him back to her own time. Or stay here with him. Think about that one, too.

Thousands of years from her family, no way of ever returning. No transportable skills, no way of living, no chance of surviving on her own.

Risking all that for Parasiel.

And all I could think about was those poor bloody girls in those tutorials.

Looking at him, and saying nothing. All I could think about was Verso.

So I told him to end it.

She saw it happen.

Parasiel – never one to avoid avoiding an awkward scene – chose to break up with Verso in public, at Cafe Vosta, surrounded by students, lecturers and visitors, all hoping to enjoy their morning coffee in peace and quiet.

Bernice was there on her own, her speculative account of chronaesthetic individuals in human history laid out on the table next to her coffee. A year's worth of research was coming in handy in ways they'd not expected. How much was her, how much had been the

Collection guiding her, she didn't know.

They needed a time-sensitive to control the remains of Brax's timeship, or else point them towards a better solution. The trouble was, the most likely candidate was a few thousand years away. But Doggles said he'd expanded the range of his time-jump technology, and while Bev Tarrant still wanted to kick his arse for developing it, she couldn't deny it was going to come in handy.

Benny was scouring her notes for target dates when Verso and Parasiel arrived together. Verso was bright and nervous, Parasiel uncharacteristically sombre. They didn't seem to notice her, tucked away in her alcove.

Benny hid behind her cappuccino, hoped they were too wrapped up in themselves to look at her. She couldn't help peeking, though – fascinated, appalled, yet she hoped sympathetic. This wasn't going to be easy for either of them.

They sat there for a while, never quite getting round to ordering. A waitress – one of Parasiel's erstwhile classmates – came over to their table, but picked up on the vibe and went off to clear away elsewhere.

Parasiel talked seriously to Verso, looking her in the eye, holding her hand where it lay on the table. Once Verso brought her other hand up to her mouth, then let it drop. The poor girl looked utterly crushed. Parasiel, to give him his due, seemed just as miserable.

Verso would get over it, Benny knew. She'd have her family to take care of her, and Parasiel – well, he'd deal with it in his own special way, and leave another sad-eyed student in his wake. She couldn't worry about them all.

Their conversation didn't last long. Verso snatched her hand away suddenly, snapped angrily back at Parasiel. He went on the defensive, tried to explain some point of his with hand gestures. Verso stood up, her chair clattering unheeded to the floor.

'But why?' she shouted, loud enough to carry through the hubbub of conversation, the clank of plates and cutlery, the piping music.

'What's different now?'

The anguish in her voice made Benny cringe. *It's for the best,* she thought. *It's for their own good. Really.*

Parasiel stared into his place setting, said something very quietly.

Verso covered her mouth with both hands, gasped out a question. He nodded.

Verso turned suddenly and looked directly towards her. The hatred in her face made Benny recoil from twelve metres away.

You never told us about the Quire.

We found your notes, but could only get at half of what you'd written.

Future scholars; a short-term study tenure; a set of temporal coordinates

(and who the hell knows what those mean, anyway?). We had to take the rest as we found it, guess the details.

And that's where we fell down, me and Parasiel both, seeing things from our own limited perspectives.

We're used to funny-looking aliens who think and act like humans. A Killoran who takes his inspiration from Roman defensive structures; a Cahlian who's just a mad scientist with bad personal hygiene. We're primed to look beyond the differences and identify with the similarities, and that's not a bad philosophy. It breeds friendship and tolerance, not hate and division. But it means we classify people.

The Quire operate on a different set of rules. Friendship and tolerance was killing them.

Because they don't have people. *Not like we do.*

As far as they could make out later, reconstructing her movements from security cameras dotted about the Collection, Verso had gone straight from Cafe Vosta to the water avenue, where she'd spent a long time looking at the fountains. She'd lingered longest by the last – the uncarved pillar of stone which Braxiatel had always called *Future*. She waited there as the muggy afternoon squelched towards dusk.

Then she left, and walked directly to the Quire's guest quarters. It was the first time since the previous evening that she'd been back to the Marble Courtyard, the first time since she'd sundered the clan.

Most of her former clansmen were scattered across the Collection on various errands: Colophon had only just left Rubric and Incunabula there, attending their forking, foliating sculpture, the clan's collective work.

(Reviewing the footage later, Benny still had no idea how it represented anything at all. It was, quite literally beyond her, by who knew how many millennia.

Somehow, though, it looked to her as if it was very nearly finished.) Verso must have timed her visit carefully. She would have had serious difficulty with Colophon or Bifolium. Even Dorso would have given her trouble. But Incunabula was tiny, and Rubric was looking increasingly frail. She overpowered them easily, and marched across to one of the three chests. The one which Bev had long ago identified as the clan's organ-bank.

The tiny servitor-creatures streamed towards her, chittering at the intrusion by this interloper, her interference with the Quire clan's person and property. They leapt upon her angrily, sinking teeth into russet flesh. But by then Verso had found the parts she needed.

When she left the scholars' guestrooms, Verso left behind an unconscious old man, a whimpering child, a pile of dead servitors and two slim, bronze-skinned hands.

None of us are innocent in this, of course.

You didn't tell us. We didn't know.

Maybe if I'd been here, if Bev hadn't spent so much time keeping the wolves from the door. If Jason were smarter or Adrian wasn't knee deep in plaster dust. If we'd looked harder, if we'd seen it, if we'd put the pieces together earlier.

We were trying to do the right thing. To make contact and be friendly. To teach them what it was like to be like us. To row and to laugh, to drink and to fight. To live.

To love.

And all we were doing was stripping them bare.

I was looking at the footage of them, that sculpture thing they spent so long building. It… It reminded me of something. Doesn't matter what now.

That's not the important bit. It's the realisation.

We never knew what they were studying. Drifting from one lecture to another, reorganising the library one stack at a time, taking over tutorials.

We thought they were studying everything. But we were forgetting those differences.

They don't think like we do. They don't look at stuff like we do. Because they don't have people *the way we do.*

They were studying us. Only that's not right, either. 'Us' implies plurality.

They were studying the Collection as a whole, as a society. As a clan.

The Collection is a good friend to the Quire.

It's what they understand. The internal dynamics of the group, how one bit bounces off another, how that impacts the whole. They put the different points of view together to form a complete structure. A holistic vision.

That's what the thing in their rooms is. It's their thesis. A model of the Collection and the people here. How it works, the way it lives and breathes.

That's what they were studying, because that's what they see when they look at us.

That's how humanity works, back in their own time.

They call themselves a clan, and that's not just a random piece of terminology. But it's not what we'd understand by the term. The Quire aren't a collection of individuals sharing a common heritage. They're not individuals at all, but pieces of a whole.

They've evolved to operate as a group. Not anything so dumb as a hive-mind, but a…

A collective work.

Getting Verso drunk should have been just one data-point. I should have been building every sighting, every story, every anecdote into a model of my own. A view of the Quire.

I should have started right back at that first meeting.

In full, I would be Bifolium Fallowsolstice IV sir Quire Scholar.

It was in his name, in all of their names. The 'Scholar' goes with 'Quire', not with 'Bifolium'. Each family, each clanstead is a single unit in their society. In the Macrocosm.

They were never scholars – they were a scholar. *A collaboration so perfect, none of them could have told you where their own work ended or began. They wouldn't have understood the question.*

Verso said, I can learn what Parasiel knows, help him to study. We'll be a student together.

A clan might be an artist, or a soldier, or a politician. All societal interaction must take place between the clans – political, fiscal, even personal. (Even romantic? Is that why Verso was so susceptible?) What happens when the Quire are alone together – the freeform play, the childlike conversation, the cartoon personalities – that's just the idling of the clan's subconscious mind, dreaming or daydreaming. It's what they do instead of sleep.

Bifolium finds it hard to sleep. Dreaming like we do, it does not come easy to him. *Verso again, as relayed by Parasiel.*

Is the clan even aware of how its components behave? Would I recognise my id if it got out of my dreams and ran round causing trouble?

It doesn't matter. Not now.

Because when Bev presented her ultimatum – try to fit in; treat us as we treat one another; deal with us on our own terms – the Quire could only go along with it by fracturing their mind.

That's why they were so scared. They knew they had to accept madness for the sake of scholarship.

Holy… I mean, can you imagine that? That's professional integrity for you.

The clan laid open its internal workings for us all to see. To tinker with and rearrange to our own liking.

We only saw them through the filter of our own assumptions. They needed our understanding and all we could do was take them to task for not living up to our expectations.

They lay themselves open for us – wide, glistening and raw, for us to do with as we wished.

Like a girl in love.

The scene at the cafe kept playing back in Benny's head all that afternoon, beginning to fade only as she shared a happy evening's playtime and then baththime with her son. Jason was having dinner with his publisher; Adrian was off with Bev somewhere. Tonight it would be just the two of them. Now Peter, cocooned in a bathrobe far too large for him, was listening raptly as she read to him the story of Peter and the Wolf. It was one of his favourites, though she was never

quite sure who he identified with the most.

When they heard the front door open, they both assumed that Jason was home early. Benny even shouted into the hall, 'What, did they only pay for one course again?'

Then Verso burst howling into the room, and Benny's home changed forever. Verso's face was a caricature of anguish, an overstated parody of human grief, her mouth wide open and red.

Her arms ended in clusters of tentacles, ruddy like her skin and grafted to her wrists without apparent join.

For an instant Benny sat immobile, paralysed by the sheer surrealism of this intrusion. Then Peter yelled in fear, and she leapt up on to the sofa seat, clutching him to her chest.

Verso's tentacles cracked like whips. Benny glimpsed stinging barbs clawing through the air towards her, then she found herself behind the cushioned rear of the sofa, pulling it further back towards the wall, making a sloping cave for her and Peter.

There was a frantic slithering as Verso tried to get a grip on the upholstery. The sofa was a heavy piece of furniture – it felt like Benny'd sprained something shifting it, in fact – and those limbs were grown for killing, not lifting.

The poor girl's keening was continuous and terrible. Noises sounding roughly like words – 'love', 'friend', 'Benny', 'Parasiel', 'nobody' – mixed in with inarticulate wailing.

Peter was crying too, almost as loud.

Tentacles snaked in at one end of their shelter and Bernice recoiled, dragging Peter back from the thorns at their tips. Behind them Verso's horrifying face, her grief and fury, tore viciously at Benny's soul.

Three loud reports – so loud it hurt – came muffled through the cushions above. A sudden silence followed, as Verso mimed cartoon astonishment. Her slithering limbs twitched wildly, then went slack.

The sofa was lifted away, then tossed aside like foam rubber as Adrian gathered Peter gently up in his hairy arms. Behind him, Bev, the metal in her hand still pointing at the woman on the floor, stared down at Benny. Her weary, sardonic expression barely hid her shock.

Verso moved weakly, as her blood spread out beneath her.

She died in my arms.

There are three holes in the wall of my living room, cracks running all the way across the plasterwork. There's a dark patch on the carpet that I'll see even when it's gone.

Her blood drained away into the fabric of my clothes and she died.

They left this afternoon.

The exact time they'd planned on leaving. Bev offered to delay establishing the anchorpoint, or bring it forward, whatever they wanted.

Rubric looked at her like he didn't understand what she was talking about.

Like Incunabula had when I called her sweetheart that time.

I think that's the other thing that made me realise the truth about them.

They'd shut themselves off when Verso died, I thought. Grief at first glance. But then I realised that wasn't it at all. It started before she died. I checked Bev's footage. It was the same day and hour that Incunabula left her egg. When I talked to Bifolium by Cafe Vosta, or Rubric in the stacks; those instincts, those traits they'd developed, had been blinked away. The way Bifolium would scratch his ear before telling an outrageous lie, or Rubric would pause to appraise your worth before he smiled at you – they were gone. Only the bland formality remained. The clan's official persona, used in dealing with outsiders.

We'd broken them apart, but now they pulled themselves in tighter than ever. They'd done it as soon as Verso told them she was staying here. It wasn't her death that they needed to recover from. It wasn't even her attack on the others. It was her leaving them. That's all.

* * *

The storm had broken that morning, almost as if their little mechanised world had its own sense of dramatic irony.

Benny stood on the terrace as the rain washed the windows of the Mansionhouse, cascading off the trees and rosebushes, creating waterfalls down from the terrace. An umbrella force field had been hastily set up to protect the time corridor and its immediate surroundings, but water streamed across the flagstones.

The only people willing to attend the farewell ceremony were those who had no choice. Benny and Bev for appearances' sake. Doggles for technical support, and Jason and Adrian for the moral kind. A handful of the senior academics, here under protest.

Benny had seen Parasiel off that morning. The lad was taking a few weeks away, visiting his parents back on Sothar. He'd given her a message for the Quire, but it was too obscene to even consider passing on. The clan might still have the ability to blow up the Collection on their way out.

Parasiel was doing… well, badly, of course. Dreadfully, even. With both parents alive, it was his first big loss, and he, like Benny, felt responsible. In time, he'd come to recognise the pain as part of himself, grow around it like a tree round an old fence-post. Perhaps it would even do him some good.

… But no. Nothing about this could be classed as good. She didn't think they'd see him again.

Our families define us, he'd told her before he left. *I need to spend some time researching my definition.*

The Quire arrived at their appointed time, five figures emerging from the haze of rain, three blocky wooden shapes hovering behind them. Their togas repelled the water, and their pelts, even Colophon's shaggy bulk, were sleek and dry.

Incunabula walked. The child was growing, had seemingly aged years in the few days since she quit her egg for good. She looked twice Peter's age already. Within the glassy globe which she now carried, Benny could make out what had been one of the monkey-servitors, suspended in a milky fluid. It, too, was growing quickly, tiny silver hairs already speckling its skin.

(Epitome was elderly, the little girl had said, the evening they'd arrived. *She died. I am her replacement.)*

Benny didn't know if they'd thought of a name yet.

Bev ran an autopsy.

A formality, she said. I didn't see the point.

Verso died from three bullet wounds to the torso. She died from love. She died from a quiet drink with a friend. What difference did it make?

We waited for the clan to leave before we started the burial.

I've spent a lot of time since getting rather drunk. Had you noticed?

I was the one who asked him to take her home. I asked him.

Even Bifolium was calm now, his marbled face serene and grave.

Bev gave them the formal farewell speech. Honoured to have been the clansmen's hosts, great hopes for future relations, peace and goodwill to all humans and posthumans. Benny wondered for whose benefit it could possibly be necessary, then realised that Bev was doing it for Brax.

This was the final task he'd set them, the one last act of service he demanded. After this, they were free.

The Quire had the good grace not to mention the fact that Bev had been spying on them. They knew, of course – it was the only way she could have seen what Verso had done, the only way she and Adrian could have got to Bernice in time.

Benny spoke only once, to Colophon.

(Since Verso's death she'd had one glimpse – just one – of the Quire's inner selves. And judging by the strain in her voice, to talk to Benny in that way had caused Dorso actual physical pain.

'Bernice,' she'd said, 'I thought it was… important you should know. I don't blame you for what took place.' She stressed the I though whether she was dissenting from the others' opinions or from the clan personality, Benny couldn't even begin to speculate.

'You may have been the one,' Dorso went on inexorably, 'who got her intoxicated and then introduced her to Parasiel. But Verso's

disloyalty was hers alone. As was her death.')

Bernice said now, 'Please take her with you, Colophon. She belongs with you.'

He stared at her, the cuddly cowboy one, and said politely. 'Thank you. But we already have sufficient organic remains.'

Benny felt Jason's hand on her shoulder, and clutched it tightly. She didn't reply.

Doggles played on the controls like a virtuoso, grinning inanely as he summoned up a hurricane within the thunderstorm. About the Quire leaves whirled, dust burst from nowhere and the sky strobed painful blacks and whites.

And then the maelstrom subsided, and there was nobody there.

They didn't even take the body with them.

There was a sour taste in Benny's mouth. The kind of taste that took a long night alone in an armchair to develop.

When her eyes opened, she had to fight against the grey light of the morning.

He was gone. Once again, lasting only as long as the echo of the time corridor.

Bernice massaged her temples for a minute, building the courage to stand up. Pace yourself, that was the cardinal rule. That's what they'd all worked out that night on top of the student housing. So long ago now. Last night she'd simply opted to drink the rulebook out of existence instead.

At first she thought it was the hangover playing tricks with her.

Standing, she looked around, slowly realising it was no trick. It had probably been like this last night, she'd just been too drunk to really notice.

The wood of the chair arm was old now. Its varnish flaking away, the surface pitted, splinters crumbling away in places.

Benny got to her feet, slowly turned around.

The edge of the desk was much the same. The fabric of the carpet was worn and threadbare in places. The windows were stained by the sun; a long crack running across the furthest pane. The paint was peeling from the canvases on the wall, their pictures faint and indistinct.

Bernice said nothing. She needed to get back to her notes, pin down the dates. They'd need to be making their own time jump soon.

There was a shout from outside. She crossed to the windows. The sky was grey, ink-brush clouds thick with rain. A lone girl was being chased by students with a water balloon down the central gravel path. A stupid game.

Bernice Summerfield, renowned archaeologist, accidental adventurer,

crack shot, lover of girly ballgowns, and, oh yes, expert in body language.

A stupid game, but there was an edge to it. In the way the girl ran, her feet kicking up harder than they should. Nervousness to her laughter. Like she didn't really trust the boys chasing her. Not really.

Beyond them, at the far end of the garden, on the slope with the rosebushes, there was a long rectangle of freshly dug soil.

She stands alone one evening in late summer.

It's September; and still the season will not break. The air is hot and sticky on the balcony; the kind of air that clings to your skin and drains life from your body. The pages of a document – abandoned on the seat next to her – ruffle in the breeze. Research, now put to work in a way she'd never expected.

Doggles says he's perfected his time-jump routine now; the device will take them anywhere they need to go. She hopes that's right, they've a long way to travel.

The lights are coming on across the Collection now. The pathways around the lake signposted by flickering globes. They're still suffering power outages; some lights only half-strength, others never showing any sign of life. Patches claimed by darkness. There's a noise in the distance, raised voices. Most likely students arguing over nothing important.

Most likely.

Behind her, there are three patches of fresh plaster on the wall.

She looks up at the sky. There in the gap in the cloud cover, she can see the stars. Every now and then, bright lights shift across the pattern.

Starships charting their own course around the planetoid. From here there's no way of knowing what they are. Earth science vessels, Martian explorers, Galyari traders. One time, one of those shifting lights had been a university and she could have looked down on the Collection, Judas in her hands.

Once, long before that, the lights had been warships.

She'd hoped never to see that again. If Doggles's machine works, she might not have to. It feels like if they can regain control of their home, they might just stand a chance against everything else.

She can't see the grave from here. Bernice is glad about that – it's the second funeral she's had to face in too short a time – only to be ashamed a moment later for the feeling.

Out of sight shouldn't mean out of mind. Not now.

She'd sat with Bev one morning last summer and they'd agreed to work together. They still are. They both know they need expertise to keep the Collection from tearing itself apart. They both know there's a war coming and they're not in a position to fight it.

They both know they need help.

But there's tension there. Something's happened, to Bev, to herself, maybe.

There's an easy answer to it.

From the communities of the Nile delta to the nests beneath Olympus Mons, people are governed by their environments. When you find yourself living in a timeship that's going insane, it's going to have a knock-on effect.

Only she can't bring herself to trust that answer.

Braxiatel is just the name on the door.

It had sounded so simple when Jason said it. This was their home, to make of what they will.

People are governed by their environments, but they also impose themselves on them. The child this place had tried to spawn had looked like Peter. No coincidence that. It knows and feeds off them as much as the other way around.

The Quire studied this place, were in touch with it and with them in a way she still does not fully understand. The lie in the easy answer is there to see.

Lightning flares just over the horizon and the air stirs as rain begins to fall.

She stands at the balcony for a minute more, feeling the drops on her face, the embrace of her rain-soaked clothes. Then she turns, opens the French windows and steps back inside the apartment.

Her bag is half-packed on the sofa.

Peter's latest game of Perception sits in the corner of the room. A tall interconnected tower of blocks and globes, cylinders, arches and triangles.

Revolving in mid-air next to it is a random geometric shape, the Key itself, removed by the holographic projector. It takes Bernice a moment to process the image, to realise that the tower that had been built around it is still standing.

She turns.

There are three patches of fresh plaster on the wall facing her.

Just the name on the door.

She lays her hand against the plaster, the texture drying smooth, waiting to be painted. She thinks of Verso, of the Quire, of Peter. She thinks of the Collection.

And she whispers one word.

'Braxiatel.'

'It might be your name on the deeds, but you don't belong here any more. This is our home, our collection.'

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